THE LITTLE AUNT





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THERE STOOD IN THE DOORWAY A GIRL LOOKING YOUNGER THAN NAN

(The Little Aunt) (Page 70)

THE LITTLE AUNT

BY

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"Six Girls and Betty," "The Doctor's Little Girl," "The Little Grey House," etc..

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CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	Miss Ailsa Brett	7
II	The Maiden Aunt	23
III	Unpacking—Minds and Trunks	40
IV	Introducing the Maiden Aunt	57
V	The New Girl	75
VI	Enthusiasms	93
VII	"Some Pumpkins"	110
VIII	Just Being Good	128
IX	The Pendulum Swings	146
X	Resting Merry	164
XI	Dramatics	182
XII	"The Romany Duchess"	199
XIII	Ailsa Judges for Herself	219
XIV	A Triangular Tangle	239
XV	The Plank	260
XVI	"What, Ailsa Brett!"	279
XVII	"The House Aunt"	297
XVIII	A Postscript	313

The Little Aunt

CHAPTER I

MISS AILSA BRETT

"I expect my sister to visit us," announced Mr. Brett suddenly.

The young Bretts were used to their father's unexpectedness. None of the Bretts ever did anything, at any time, or in any way that could have been predicted, and this characteristic they derived first hand from their father; their mother had merely caught it from having married a Brett. But this announcement was unforeseen beyond the ordinary.

"It's your half-sister, isn't it?" asked Nan Brett, the eldest girl, by way of collecting her thoughts aloud. "You haven't a whole sister, have you?"

"No, of course not, but that doesn't affect her as a visitor. She's coming," returned Mr. Brett.

The young Bretts had never known any member of their father's family. His father had married a second time, and Mr. Brett had left home in consequence when he was sixteen. He and his sister could not—or thought that they could not—submit to a new mother who was only four or five years older than they were, so they had taken themselves off to a distant relative and at his house had finished their growing up. The sister had married and gone to Aus-

tralia, such an unlikely thing to do that it proved her a true Brett. There she had died, so Nan was right in saying that her father had no "whole sister."

In a general way the young Bretts knew that their father had three or four half brothers and sisters, but till this moment these fractional aunts and uncles had not actually taken on existence in their minds.

"Is she married?" asked Dinsmore, the oldest boy. He spoke in tones that showed that he expected the worst, and he rubbed his chin gloomily along the back of the chair on which he sat astride, wincing occasionally when he forgot to go lighter over the middle, where the carving was.

Mr. Brett looked at him, then he laughed, "No, Dins, she's not married," he said. His manner was queer, and sharp Tilly, the middle girl, pounced upon him in an instant. Tilly's name was Matilda Pillsbury and she was called Tilly-Pilly, "the Pill" and "the Flour of the Family," for obvious reasons. She was ten years old, abnormally thin and long, and given to pouncing.

"An old maid!" Tilly cried now. "Isn't that the limit? A maiden aunt! We don't need her, father—Mr. Augustus Brett!"

"You don't know what you need, Till; I do." And her father made a suggestive motion with his right arm that caused Dins to call out "Second that motion!"

"Well, I agree with the Pill," said Nan

heartily. "A maiden aunt in the house is *not* a well-spring of joy. We are not model children, but we have about as much fun as there is going—and we generally make it go, besides. And if the neighbors do think we're the worst ever we know perfectly well that they're sadly mistaken. We are not bad one speck; we raise Cain, but we don't need caning. We are square and we honor our parents in our own way, though we do act as if they were jokes—which they are! She paused to squeeze her father's arm. "And now there will come a maiden aunt, right into the bosom of our family, misunderstanding us and disapproving us and making a nuisance of herself and embittering our youth! Can't I see her! Kind of thin, like the Pill, but not in the least like her in any other way. Rigid and correct, forever saying: 'Children!' in that tone, you know! Wears taffeta day in and day out, and looks like it, all shiny and proper! We'll either die under it, or finish her, that's sure. I guess we'll finish her," added Nan thoughtfully.

"Well, now I guess!" echoed Dins. "Any doubt which way it'll go, Sister Anne?" "What'll she bring us?" inquired the baby, little Augusta, called "the Gussette," by way of diminutive and to emphasize her feminine form of her father's name.

"She'll bring us each a little Bible, too small type," cried Tilly.

"It wouldn't hurt you to have one," said Mrs. Brett, who had come in unseen.

She was round and plump and merry, her light hair always looked rumpled and she usually appeared slightly out of breath, as if she were hurrying to catch up with her utterly hopeless arrears of unperformed tasks. Her children adored her, treating her with affectionate nonsense, as if she had been, as Nan said, "a joke," but, though their manner to her and to their father, shocked people who did not understand it, it was rarely that the young Bretts failed to carry out the least suggestion from either of their parents. In their queer, scrambling, happy-go-lucky way the elder Bretts had so much love from their noisy brood that they were better obeyed than most parents—only it did not look like obedience, for neither father nor mother often uttered a command.

"Whom were you talking about, children?" Mrs. Brett now added.

"Of our maiden aunt," said Nan, making a wry face.

"Coming here," added Tilly. Then as she intercepted a glance that passed between her father and mother, she cried: "N. T., N. T.!" Which was the Brett code, standing for "No telegraphing!" used when they meant to forbid secrets between any members of the family.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Brett blandly. "Your Aunt Ailsa; I see. We hardly realized that you had an Aunt Ailsa, did we?"

"Never heard of her, 's far as I know," growled Dins, and the tone did away with the necessity of adding: "And never wanted to."

"What we say, mumsy, is that we do not need her," explained Nan. "We know what a maiden aunt is in books and we don't want one in our family serial. The best thing Daddy Brett can do is to change his name and dye his whiskers, and refuse to be a brother to her."

"Maybe, she won't be as bad as we think," suggested Jimmy, speaking for the first time. He was eight years old, and was, comparatively, the quiet one of the family. "Pull down your shades, sunny Jim; no time for shining now," said Dins. "I hate taking a cheerful view of things."

"Children," said Mr. Brett solemnly. "I shall be much hurt if you are wanting in respectful consideration of my sister's, Miss Ailsa Brett's, feelings. Even though I have not known her and she is but my half sister still you must treat her as you should."

"There, you see!" Nan appealed to the world in an aggrieved tone. "The trail of the serpent is stalking over our Eden!"

"Trails don't stalk, sister Anne," murmured Dins. "Serpents themselves aren't what you could call real stalkers."

"When did Daddy Brett ever lecture us before on our behavior, which we haven't had a chance to behave?" Nan continued, disregarding him. "My goodness, father—Mr. Augustus Brett, what are we to do and how do you want us to do it?"

"When Miss Brett comes you must receive her politely," Mr. Brett began his instruc-

tion. "You are to give her the best chair when she enters the room, rising of course, respectfully. We have never insisted on these formal manners toward ourselves, your mother and I, but toward your Aunt Ailsa it will be necessary to observe them. You must always stand until she is seated. You must reply to her remarks with what I should describe as frank deference. You must all be perfectly quiet if she takes a nap in the afternoon, as maiden ladies are said to be prone to do. You must be always ready to find her eyeglasses—maiden ladies frequently mislay them—and to thread her needles, or hold her yarn when she is at work. You are to be ready to escort her to walk, or to lectures, or to whatever form of improving entertainment she is addicted. You are to read aloud to her at any and all times that she desires you to. In a word, you must be the sort of good and dutiful children, quiet, self-effacing, yet attentive, that I am sure your Aunt Ailsa will expect to find you."

Dins looked up, as Nan sank back in her chair, pretending to faint, and Tilly groaned, falling face downward into the sofa pillow.

"Something queer about this," Dins observed. "The only way father could get us to be that sort of stained glass kids would be to take us to a taxidermist and have us all stuffed, and he knows it. Own up, Daddy Brett; what are you getting at?"

"My dear boy," said Mr. Brett still more solemnly, but there was a look in his eye that

showed Dins that the solemnity was not as solemn as it seemed, "I fear that you may fall short of the standard I have set you, but I hope that you will aim at it, so that you won't completely miss it. Your Aunt Ailsa is a stranger to us all and you must lay aside your nonsense if she proves to be a serious-minded lady, whom it will annoy. Keep in mind that your maiden aunt is coming and that while she is here you must be quiet and conventional, which you know, you never are as it is."

"She's younger than you, and you're not old enough to want a padded cell," said Nan, with a sudden flash of Jimmy's hopefulness. "Neither is mumsy. Maybe Aunt Ailsa won't be the kind of pulpit-on-wheels we're looking for."

But her father did not encourage her cheerfuller vein.

"A maiden aunt, you know," he suggested, shaking his head. "You can't expect her to be like us, who have grown up with you, so to speak. "The only thing to do is to look upon her coming as a sort of discipline and to make up your minds to doing your duty just as well as you can."

Dins arose from his chair by the simple, if not wholly graceful expedient of pulling it out from under him by the back upon which he had been dismally resting his chin all this time. He swung it around above his head, setting the chandelier quivering as he did so, and planted the chair on its legs with its back against the wall with an

emphasis that told all he could not say. Then he began to chant dismally and slowly to the tune known as "Tell Aunt Rhody."

"Tell Aunt Ailsa, tell Aunt Ailsa, tell Aunt Ailsa to cut us out."

Whereupon Nan, followed by Tilly and Jim joined him in the second line:

"We don't want her, we don't want her, we don't want her there's no doubt."

Which, though not a brilliant performance seemed to make them feel better.

Mrs. Brett's motherly heart failed her. "It's really a shame, Gus!" she declared, but went no further when her Gus frowned at her. "Never mind, children," she said cheerfully, being checked in her desire to say something else. "I've no doubt we'll all get on more comfortably than we think with this Aunt Ailsa. It doesn't seem—now does it?—as though she could be so dreadfully stiff and precise if she's any fraction of a relation to us? And a half sister is really a close relation."

"Well, it's just half Nan's relation to me," observed Dins.

"Yes, and with half gone there must be a sense of nonsense left in Aunt Ailsa big enough to enjoy part of your frolics, at any rate," said their mother. "Come on; let's make some candy and not cross our bridges till we get to them."

"You nice little bundle of mumsiness!" cried Nan affectionately. "I thought you said

you had to make that shirt waist for yourself this very day."

"So I do have to!" laughed Mrs. Brett. "I forgot all about it. Oh dear! Well, never mind!" she added cheering up. "If you hadn't reminded me I'd have made the candy and never been the wiser, so I may as well make it any way, and cheer you poor frightened chickens. I dare say I'll get on without the waist a while longer, though how I do not see, for I cannot mend my old one once more. Never mind; fudge now and shirt waists later!"

She wound her arm around her oldest daughter and pulled Tilly and Jimmy into line with her other hand, while little Gussie hung herself around her mother's waist. Thus adorned, and with Dins tearing out ahead of her Mrs. Brett went toward the kitchen to make fudge and a pleasant jollification for her children, while her sorely needed waist waited. Which goes to show what a happy, but wholly irresponsible family the Brett's was, one which a correct maiden aunt might well disapprove, yet surely ought to love.

The next three days were busy ones for it seemed that the maiden aunt was not only coming, she was coming within less than a week, and preparations for her arrival went on vigorously. For the first time since its foundation the House of Brett was divided against itself. The children were gloomy, while the heads of the house were twinkling with pleasure, as if they and the whole world—except their own young

brood—shared a pleasant, humorous secret.

This was such an unwonted state of things that it increased the young Brett's gloom; as a rule they were twinkling too, for this air of possessing a humorous secret was the happy way that all the Bretts had of facing the world. It was hard to be dreading and disliking the coming of the maiden aunt and to see one's ordinarily chummy parents going about with beaming faces.

"Of course, it's because they are really grown up, though they seem just like us," explained Tilly disgustedly. "We don't feel it in them, but I suppose there's one side of every father and mother, even the jolliest ones, that likes to sit down and talk with maiden aunts."

"Something like that girl in the show who had a yellow dress on the right hand half of herself, and black on the other half of her, so she looked like two girls when she whirled around," Jimmie helped his sister develop her idea.

The guest chamber had to be put into apple pie order for the expected guest. Nan covered the couch cushions anew so that the maiden aunt might be induced to lie down, if she were not strong. Dins nailed new strips of canvas across the under side of the seat of the arm chair. "She may be a heavy weight," he said as if he thought her capable of almost anything.

Tillie emptied the bran out of the pin cushion after little Gussie discovered a small mouse on the dresser, nibbling it, because she insisted that

there might be a family of mice established in its middle.

"And if a maiden aunt happened to run a pin in and struck a mouse, and it squeaked she'd probably go on something awful," Tilly said.

"I should myself," said Nan, "but who ever heard of a mouse in a pin cushion?"

"One was nibbling it, and maybe there was another inside," insisted Tilly, and so she filled the pin cushion all over again, and made it as humpy as a map in a physical geography.

"Nan, suppose we do something to lighten your gloom?" laughed Mrs. Brett. "Suppose while we are so busy over the guest room we fit up that little room at the end of the hall for a guest room for your friends? If we made a sunny young girl's room out of it, it would be a sort of antidote to all these sofa cushion-easy-chair-maiden-auntish preparations! And we shall need it, for there won't be a place for your friends if Aunt Ailsa has the guest room."

"It would be gay," said Nan promptly, "but as to needing it, you know mumsy, no one but Mona ever stays all night with me, and she would rather go right in with me. But it would be cheering to fix it up, if you want to do it."

"Dins might ask a boy now and then," said Mrs. Brett briskly. "I've been thinking of looking up some of our young cousins in the west; you ought to know one another. Then I really mean to try to give you a particularly pleasant winter this year, if the fact that your aunt is here makes your home less enjoyable to you."

"What a good little thing you are, small mumsy!" cried Nan with compunction. I guess we're Brett-pigs, or piggish Bretts all right! We've no business to take one aunt so hard, we make fuss enough for a whole hill of aunts coming. But it's a compliment to you, if you look at it right; we don't want our home invaded; it's so nice as it is! But I'll say one thing for you and Daddy Brett; I never saw you take our trouble so easily," added Nan, with a return of the vague suspicion of something that she did not understand, a suspicion that she could neither verify nor vanish.

"My dear little Nancy, I don't want our happy life interfered with one bit more than you do, but I am hopeful that a sister of your Daddy Brett, even though half of her sisterhood is lopped off, may not be a kill-joy," returned Mrs. Brett.

"Now about the little room. Suppose we try to make it all the younger looking room for our having added a few years to the big guest room, so to speak? I'm going to paint the floor yellow—the border around the rug, I mean. And I'm going to buy the prettiest white cotton rug with yellow figures that you ever met. I saw it down at Hammatt's, just the right size for that room, eight by ten feet; that will give us a two foot border of paint all around. Then I shall buy a bird's-eye maple dresser and dressing table, and a three-quarters brass bed; you know the paper is yellow and white, and perfectly fresh. And we'll get together a few good

photographs, and—oh, yes! That creamy cast of Luca della Robbia's Annunciation! Why, Nanette, it will be a perfect sunbeam of a golden room for a young girl!

Mrs. Brett had talked herself into a state of flushed, short-breathed enthusiasm, after her amiable fashion, rumbling her fly-away light hair as she talked. Nan flew at her and hugged her till she was still more breathless. "You cunning little plump duckie-mumsy!" she cried. "You look seven months, three weeks and five days younger than I am, this minute, and I'm only just sliding up to fifteen, as you may have heard. Dins and I will paint the floor. I'll run down town and get a color card of paints."

"I have the paint," confessed Mrs. Brett. "We ought to begin it to-night. I don't want the smell of turpentine around when your aunt Ailsa arrives."

Dins and Nan painted till bed time, and the next afternoon painted a second coat over what they had done the night before, with the result that the sunny little southern room at the head of the stairs beamed brightly around its edges in sunshine color. Hammatt's delivered the white and gold rug, and it was the prettiest thing possible in its place, as anything is likely to be that is exactly in its right place. When the bird's-eye maple furniture, flanked by the shining brass bed, came into the room to rest on that rug and yellow border, and when Mrs. Brett's "few good photographs and the creamy

cast" had been hung in their proper places, the room was a joy to enter.

"A small, low white willow rocker, and one dark wood chair, black wood, oiled in dull finish, and a small dark table to bring out the white and yellow," murmured Mrs. Brett, making a mental memorandum. "Nan, it really is the dearest room!"

"At least that!" echoed Nan. "I'm afraid the maiden aunt will want it instead of her own."

"We'll tell her that we've fitted it up for possible young visitors," said Mrs. Brett. Don't you think that you ought to practise calling her Aunt Ailsa? She'll be here by this time to-morrow."

Nan groaned, then covered it with a cough, having resolved to bear the trial more cheerfully.

"Aunt Ailsa, Aunt Ailsa, what is it ails her?" she chanted. "I can say it. You couldn't forget and call her the maiden aunt, so you'd have to remember to say Aunt Ailsa."

"I am sure I hope you always will," said Mr. Brett, entering unexpectedly.

"We have such absurd habits of nicknaming in this family—like your calling your mother 'mumsy,' and me 'Daddy Brett,' for instance, that I'm afraid you may strike your aunt as disrespectful. Do you think that you can promise me always to call your aunt Aunt Ailsa?"

"Well, father mine, what can be the matter with this visit anyway?" cried Nan, with a

kind of affectionate exasperation. "Of course, I'll call her that. What else could I call her? I'll promise solemnly, honest true, black and blue, to call my dear maiden half aunt Aunt Ailsa. Does that make you feel easier?"

Mr. Brett shook his head, with a look of deep despondency. "It does not, oh, it does not," he sighed. "That ever I should live to doubt my daughter's promise! But my mind misgives me when I see you in imagination by my sister's eyes, and realize what lax ways are ours."

Nan stared at him, frowning and laughing. "I can't make you out, Daddy Brett. You look as though you meant it, but you can't have changed all at once. Aunt Ailsa's really coming, of course? It isn't a huge joke and someone else coming to surprise us, is it?" she asked.

"Nan, my half sister, Miss Ailsa Brett will be here, in this house, to-morrow at this hour; I have already told you that this is the case," said Mr. Brett. "And I cannot help knowing what a difference it will make to us all, and being anxious that you children should be more restrained in your manners than you have ever been heretofore."

"You never would say before it would make any difference to have her here!" Nan cried, as Tilly tumbled up stairs and into the room headlong. "Someone must come and set the Gussette. She's bothering in the kitchen and Amanda says she won't have her there one more minute," she gasped. It was the family habit

to allude to anything done for the youngest member as "setting the Gussette."

"I'll take her away and tell her a story; I'm tired anyway," said Mrs. Brett, hurrying away.

Nan laughed. "Poor Daddy Brett! Our manners don't seem restrained," she said.

"But it's the queerest thing how Aunt Ailsa's coming has affected you. I think there's a trick somewhere floating around, but I can't see into it—yet."

"To-morrow night the maiden aunt will be here," remarked Tilly, with her mouth full of oyster crackers which she was rapidly administering to herself, whole, not to make crumbs in the fresh little additional guest room. "Amanda told me she was going to make a peach 'mer-rin-gay,' and I thought I'd die! That's for our maiden aunt's dessert."

"I'm going to get out that doyley I began to outline for mumsy when I was twelve, observed Nan. "The linen is perfectly yellow and the work is perfectly black, but I've got to be doing some fancy work when our maiden aunt comes."

"I sha'n't sleep to-night much, said Tilly. "I'm so stirred up over her." With which she stuffed her last two crackers into her mouth and choked explosively, coughing crumbs on the new rug.

"And you've got to sweep them up, Tilly-Pilly," said Nan sternly. "Get the dust pan, Pill. There can't be a crumb in a house that's waiting for its maiden aunt to arrive."

CHAPTER II

THE MAIDEN AUNT

The Bretts were all up early the next morning, although Mr. Brett's sister would not arrive until the middle of the afternoon.

"It's our last day of freedom, so we got up early to whoop it up till train time," explained Dinsmore, when his mother betrayed surprise at seeing him the first of her brood to enter the dining room at breakfast time. Waking Dins was ordinarily a task which the united efforts of the family could not accomplish in time for breakfast.

But "whooping it up" is a spontaneous process; it is difficult to have an uproarious good time merely by making up one's mind to it. One cannot order high spirits delivered at the door like alcohol.

So the day which the young Bretts dismally regarded as their last free one dragged through without—as Tilly noticed—"their whooping it up one single whoop."

Mr. Brett departed to meet his sister at two, immediately after luncheon, and this made her actually a living being to the young nephews and nieces; she had not been quite realized before.

Mrs. Brett was so cheerful, so ready to twinkle and dimple into laughter that Nan, usually the merriest of girls, watched, with almost a sulky

expression, her mother making Gussie spick and span to greet her relative. When the little Gussette was a model of fleckless white and outstanding ruffles, and had been bidden to amuse herself in the most unrumpling ways for the next hour, Nan reluctantly drew herself up out of the lounging position into which she had sunk in the big chair by the window of her mother's room, and stretched her arms toward the ceiling.

"I suppose I must go and adorn too," she sighed. "I think I'll put on my blue?"

"To harmonize with your mind?" laughed her mother. "But it doesn't, not a bit. You look prettier and blither in that than in most little gowns, which is a better reason for wearing it, after all. Yes, honey, put on your blue, and do arrange your hair the way I like to see it."

"Do you want the maiden aunt to think your eldest daughter an ornament to the family?" asked Nan, with a smile more like her own. "I'll fluff my hair, and cuff my sleeves, and stuff my—shoes! My pumps are a tiny bit tight! And buff my finger nails, with the buffer, you know! And ruff my neck, and—are there any more double ffs? Oh, yes! Muff catching good looks after all, and huff my temper and bluff it all out when I meet Aunt Ailsa." By the time she had reached the end of her string of nonsense Nan felt decidedly better and her eyes laughed again.

"I don't know that anyone pinned you down

to preparations in the key of double ff!" cried Mrs. Brett. "But run along, ninny Nanny O, and make yourself presentable. "I may as well confess that I do want your Aunt Ailsa and you to be particularly good friends."

"Goodness me!" cried Nan. "Am I the sort of girl a maiden aunt would like?" She hurried off to her own room and her mother, rearranging her hair before the mirror, watched the girl go, her flitting reflected in the glass of the dressing table, with a decided conviction that Nan was the kind of a girl almost anyone would like. For Nan was not only winsome, but decidedly pretty, with light hair like her mother's, breaking everywhere into rings of curling ends, dark, laughing blue eyes under dark lashes, a flexible, warm mouth, a nice little nose and the kind of fair skin that tans a beautiful brown and looks the better for it.

Three-quarters of an hour later the younger Bretts, with their mother, were assembled in the drawing room—if the Brett house could be correctly said to have a drawing room—in the pink of perfect order to receive the expected guest.

Dins wore his best suit, a brown with a tie two shades lighter, and his hair was smooth and shining to the most improbable extent; he had permitted himself a geranium leaf with a sprig of mignonette and a bit of sweet alyssum, which still survived in the garden, to adorn his buttonhole, and his collar left nothing to be desired—except ease for its wearer. Tilly always man-

aged to look funny when she was in her best; she was so exceedingly thin and tall that her play clothes were more becoming to her than formal ones, but Tilly's white duck middy blouse looked better on her to-day than more elaborate gowns did. Mrs. Brett had discovered that when she looked at Tilly it was usually to regret that she had not chosen "the other design" which she had noticed in her fashion magazine as "suitable for a girl of ten," and that this happened no matter which one she had selected, and whichever dress happened to be in question.

Jimmy was an attractive lad in his gray mixed tweed knickerbocker suit, with his light hair as slick as his elder brother's. And Nan—well, Nan was certainly a pleasureable bit of girlhood to behold, in her Alice blue gown with black ribbons catching her soft braids behind each ear.

"And you look perfectly dear, mumsy," said Nan, replying to her mother's thoughts as she had a trick of doing, though it was not hard to see that Mrs. Brett was critically surveying her flock at that moment.

Mr. Brett came in—alone!

"Anything happened to her, father?" asked Dins hopefully. If only the maiden aunt had been detained at home at the last moment!

"Not unless it has happened since I left her," said Mr. Brett.

"Is she here? Did you leave her to come alone?" cried Mrs. Brett and Nan together.

"I got out at the corner and came on alone; I had an errand," said Mr. Brett vaguely. "Your Aunt Ailsa is driving, ought to be here now. I came up with her almost to the house."

He glanced at his wife, and the children saw the glance; everybody understood that Mr. Brett, had, for some reason known to himself, wished to be at home when the dreaded maiden aunt arrived. Before Dins and Nan had time to marvel over this new form of Brett unexpectedness, a carriage rolled up to the door and Mr. Brett, waving back his wife, went out to usher in its occupant.

He returned in a moment and with him—Where was the maiden aunt?

A tiny, dark girl, whose face looked as if she might be Nan's age, but whose body relegated her to Tilly's ten years, an elfin, pretty mischievous little creature in a dark blue traveling suit, stood beside Mr. Brett as he paused in the doorway.

"I have no one to present to you but this small girl," he said pensively. "The Aunt Ailsa you looked for did not come."

"Who is she?" cried Dins, staring as Jim and Tilly and even Gussie stared, while Mrs. Brett laughed, quite disregarding conventions.

"Are you—is she—" Nan could say no more.

"Is she out in the carriage?" "Didn't she come?" cried Jim and Gussie together.

Tilly made a dash at the laughing little stranger.

"Where's our Aunt Ailsa?" she demanded

with unintentional fierceness, as if this small person were an ogre who might have maiden aunts packed away in her suit case. "Are you our cousin? I thought Aunt Ailsa wasn't married."

For an instant the girl's dark eyes and white teeth flashed in a laugh, then she drew herself up, pulled her face into stern gravity, and replied to them all at once: "My dear little nieces and nephews, I am your Aunt Ailsa."

The five young Bretts gasped in an audible quinteette of amazement. Then Dins said, slowly and emphatically: "Well, what—do—you—know—about—that!"

"Aunt Ailsa's severe dignity broke up into such twinkling, merry laughter that her face looked as if it were cut into myriads of little facets to catch the light, like a diamond.

"I know all about it!" she cried. "Gus told me coming up from the station."

"Gus!" She was no older than themselves and so tiny, yet she called their father Gus! The Bretts had to say to themselves hard: "Because she is father's sister, Aunt Ailsa just the same. But they could not realize it.

"I thought I'd die laughing," "the maiden aunt" went on. "Gus said he'd never have thought of this lovely joke, but when you played it on yourselves he helped it out, he and Molly."

"Molly!" That was their mother. Little Gussie turned to look at her to see what effect this use of her name had upon her.

"Isn't it the best ever!" cried Ailsa, having paused to rummage for her handkerchief to wipe her brimming eyes. Wouldn't you imagine you'd have known I was Gus' youngest half sister, so couldn't be any older than you are? Children," she added with one of her elfin rapid changes, resuming "her aunt voice," as Tilly called it later, "come here and kiss your aunt. I am surprised at your lack of manners."

With that Nan suddenly recovered herself and realized two things at once. First, that it might hurt this girl to discover that the Bretts knew really nothing about their father's family. Nan was kindness itself, so this possibility pained her. Secondly, that it was a colossal piece of luck that had brought them, instead of the critical aunt they dreaded, a girl of their own age who would evidently be at least as ready for pranks as the young Bretts were.

Moved by these two motives, Nan flew at Ailsa and hugged her breathlessly. "I never, never, never could be so surprised!" she cried, not quite accurately, for she was, precisely "so surprised." "But it's gloriumphant! And you are a duck." Ailsa hugged Nan equally emphatically. "Maybe we won't have fun!" she murmured. Then Dins kissed Ailsa, after which Jimmy did not mind it so much, and Tilly made a dash at her that collided with Gussie's onslaught from the other direction, but Ailsa sorted them out and hugged them both. After which the six young people paused and scrutinized one another all over again, unable to keep hold

of the fact that this small girl was actually Miss Ailsa Brett.

Mrs. Brett intervened. "There's a little lunch ready in the dining room, Ailsa. Come and drink a cup of chocolate and eat a lettuce sandwich, when Nan shall take you to your room."

"I am hungry; I usually am," said Ailsa, candidly. She pulled off her gloves and her hat and coat with the quickness of motion that seemed to be characteristic of her and which, with her slender form, her bright, dark eyes, gave her a bird-like effect. She looked steadily at her sister-in-law for a moment, appraising her, then she smiled and put an arm around her with a confiding movement that was winning.

"I was afraid of you," she confessed, implying that the fear was quite over. "Of course I knew we young folks would get on all right, and Gus wouldn't matter, because men are out so much. But if you didn't like me—!" Ailsa broke off with a gesture expressive of tragedy.

"And now you're sure that I shall like you?" laughed Mrs. Brett.

"You like everybody that you can possibly like," said Ailsa shrewdly. "Especially nice girls, I think," she added. "I'm a terror, they say at home, but—well, you'll see! I'm not a sneak anyway. I was wondering and wondering all the way coming on here what I should call you. I never had seen Gus and it did seem pretty awful to have to call a strange man by his first name, right away. But he is my half

brother and I knew I had to. I practised on the train, kept sayng over and over: 'No fuss; say Gus!' or: 'Don't fuss, say Gus!' It helped a lot. But you! I didn't know what you'd want me to do. I knew you were Mary, and you know there are all kinds of Maries. Some get to be Mays, some Minnies—it's awful when they turn Maimies!—and some keep on being calm, beautiful Mary. And some—the nice, lovable, homey ones!—are Mollies. I asked Gus the first thing, and he said you were his dear little Molly, so then I knew! I felt a lot better."

"Ailsa! What a chatterbox!" laughed Mr. Brett's "dear little Molly," pulling the girl's travel-tossed hair.

Ailsa stopped—they had moved toward the dining room—pretending to feel aggrieved. "Now you say that the very first thing!" she cried. "That's what they said at home! What makes you say it too, Sister Molly? I was going to try calling Gus, Brother Augustus at first, but it sounded like a monk—and made me feel like a monkey!"

"And yet nothing further from a person who would care about monkey tricks could be imagined than you are, Sister Ailsa," observed Mr. Brett gravely. "As to calling you a chatterbox, this is a world in which the best of us are misunderstood and often misrepresented."

No one had ever before known the Brett children to be so silent as they were now in the process of adjusting their minds to the strange

outcome of this arrival and listening to Ailsa's chatter, though the Bretts were famous for doing unexpected things, no one in the family had ever done anything so unexpected as this Ailsa Brett had done in being a young girl. There was something about her that her half brother's children could not define. She was perfectly natural, unaffected, girlish, yet one felt that she was a little person accustomed to rely upon herself. Beneath her tiny form and elfin face there was something that seemed to declare force of character. She chattered like a wren as blithely and confidingly, yet there was nothing pert or impertinent in her readiness of tongue and wit. Friendly herself, she took for granted friendliness in these new-met relatives. Sweet Nan Brett, fully half a head taller than her contemporaneous aunt, and no more frolicsome, appeared younger in a way that was hard to define; it was really the quality of little girlhood that clings long to a girl who depends upon her mother for guidance. Ailsa's brother and his wife saw that, whether for good or ill, Ailsa's influence would be strong over Nan, that their own girl would play a continuous game of "Follow-my-leader" in the wake of her lively little half aunt.

"Oh, how good it looks, how *good!*" cried Ailsa fervently, at the first glimpse of the dining room with one end of the table spread with a hemstitched carving cloth and set with chocolate cups, delicate plates and sparkling glass.

"We couldn't put anything to eat on the

table till we were going to be here ourselves," explained Tilly, "on 'count of Funny and Middy."

"Sounds like home," commented Ailsa. "We never can set a table and leave it, either. Cats?"

"Yes," Jimmy eagerly took up the theme. "Do you love 'em? Funny's all mixed up, black and yellow, funniest looking cat you ever saw. Middy's her little brother, but he's three years younger. He's all yellow, golden, you know; that's why his name is Midas, see?"

"I see! The golden touch. And he'd jump up and give the food a golden touch if you left him in the room with it? That's just like home; we've several cats—more than that! Of course I love them. Hallo, who's this?" added Ailsa.

"That's Peggy!" shouted Gussie triumphantly. "That's our darling Peggy."

"She's yellow, too, and round," said Ailsa. "What a dear, dear little face! She rolls her eyes like a piccaninny. Oh, look at her! You darling!"

For Jimmy had picked up the small dog, a smooth haired, yellow little creature, with a kinky tail carried to one side over a particularly plump little body, and a sensitive, intelligent little face, and was holding her up while the small dog wildly waved her fore paws, prayerfully.

"If you want cakey ask for it, Peggy," Jimmy was saying. "Want some cakey-cake?" Peggy whined and barked and waved her paws harder than ever, while Jimmy went on to ex-

plain: "Everything that Peggy has must be spoken that way. She gets a dinky-dink when she's thirsty, and she has a coatie-coat that she wears out doors when it's cold, and she sleeps on a cushy-cush in her nes'y-nest—that's a box fixed up behind the stove, you know. And she goes walky-walk, and plays with her bally-ball and—lots of things like that. We don't know why, but you've got to say everything that way about Peggy's things. Oh yes; she has dog biscuits, and those are her bicky-bicks, and she's Peggy-Peg, or else Piggy-Peg, herself."

"I'm so glad you're silly kids," approved Ailsa. "If I'd found you didn't like nonsense it would have been just as hard for me as it would have been for you if I'd been the maiden aunt you thought I was. Isn't she the dearest duck of a pupums!"

"Wait till you know her," said Dins, who had been perfectly silent throughout this introductory half hour.

Gussie went up and whispered in Ailsa's ear, so that Peggy should not hear: "Ask her where Gyppie Besecker is."

"Where's Gyppie Besecker, Peggy? where's Gyp?" obediently repeated Ailsa.

In an instant Peggy had wriggled out of Jimmy's arms and was careering around the window, jumping up and down in a vain effort to look out, her brows knitted, one ear up and one down, barking so shrilly that Ailsa covered her ears.

"That's a little rabbit hound down the road.

Peggy's perfectly crazy about her," explained Jimmy. "When we want her to sit for her picture the only way we can get her brightened up, and not to look as if she was being murdered is to ask her about Gyppie. Never mind, Peggy. Gyppie's gone now."

Nan and Tilly had by this time brought in the steaming chocolate pot, a plate piled high with sandwiches and a plate of small cakes, while Peggy, frantic at the sight of lunch at this unlikely hour, sat up on her hind legs, praying with her fore paws pathetically, though no one paid any attention to her.

"I'm the hungriest girl in the world," sighed Ailsa, rolling up her eyes much after Peggy's fashion, at the first bite of Mrs. Brett's delicious thin lettuce sandwich. "I don't mind being hungry to-day, because I've been traveling, but my appetite mortifies me when there's no excuse for it."

"I thought growing was excuse enough," remarked Dins, helping himself to a sandwich and eating it in two bites.

"But you see I haven't grown much, not nearly enough to match all I eat," said Ailsa.

"May I offer you a cup of chocolate, Aunt Ailsa?" asked Nan demurely.

Ailsa stiffened at once. "Thank you, Anne, I usually drink green tea, but you may pour me a cup of chocolate, since I see no tea prepared for me," she said. Then both girls laughed till they choked and cried over this bit

of humor, and, by the time they had recovered their breath felt far better acquainted.

"I promised Daddy Brett I'd call you Aunt Ailsa, so I've got to do it unless he lets me off," explained Nan. "I couldn't imagine why he was so careful to make me promise; I didn't see what else I could call you; I see now."

"Augustus," said Ailsa, turning her dancing eyes, but a sober face to her brother, "I prefer that the children should address me simply by my christian name. I am accustomed to children who treat me almost as one of themselves, and I prefer that your young folks should do so. Please allow Anne to call me simply Ailsa. As long as she does not mean it disrespectfully I shall not be offended. When I choose to exert my auntly authority I shall of course, insist on her respecting it."

Ailsa delivered this dignified speech with such an air, her cheeks scarlet from repressed laughter, her dark eyes fairly snapping, but her lips pursed into a real "papa-potatoes-prunes-prisms" shape, that the rest of the Bretts shouted, especially when at its close, she looked toward the door that led to the pantry and winked, a big, deliberate, scampish wink that was in sharp contrast to her assumed dignity.

"Oh, say, you're a peacherino, all right!" cried Dins fervently, coming up breathless from a header into the pillows piled in the window seat. "What made you wink at the door that way, auntie?"

"Couldn't help it," sighed Ailsa, helping

her self carefully to a pink iced small cake. "There was an eye at the crack looking at me and it really had to be winked at. It wasn't anything else but an eye, a large dark eye. It had to be winked at," she repeated.

This added the final touch to the young Brett's joy. They doubled up and shrieked with laughter, in which Mr. and Mrs. Brett joined. Ailsa laughed sympathetically, but, as she said, "was outside the joke."

"It was—it was Amanda!" gasped Nan at last. "She couldn't wait to see you, so she went into the pantry and peeped through the crack of the door."

"Cook?" asked Ailsa.

Nan nodded. "Our good, good, funny, big black Amanda. She's everything, cook and all," she explained. "She's just as useful, if not more so, as one of those knives that have several blades and a corkscrew and other tools in it. She's interested in us more than she is in herself, she's the best old soul on earth. She couldn't wait to see our Aunt Ailsa. I forgot to tell her you were only a girl."

"Don't you think I ought to go out and speak to her?" suggested Ailsa. "If she is so fond of you all, she'd like it if I went out to her right away, wouldn't she?"

Mrs. Brett gave her little sister-in-law a look of warm approval. "That's a fine thoughtfulness, Ailsa," she said heartily. "There's more than madcap mischief under that curly dark head of yours! Amanda will appreciate your

taking the trouble to make her acquaintance, and she deserves consideration. That is the sort of good breeding that is not acquired, but is innate, my dear."

Ailsa looked up, surprised. "Anybody would be decent to a loving old servant, wouldn't they?" she said.

"Run along, little sister; Nan, take Ailsa out to the kitchen," said Mrs. Brett, not replying more directly, except with another warm smile.

Nan led the way and Ailsa followed her into the big, clean kitchen where Amanda, as black as her shining range, sat fanning herself with her apron.

"This is father's sister, Ailsa, Amanda," said Nan.

Amanda got upon her carpet-slippered feet and bowed, rolling up her eyes till only the whites showed.

"How come you-all thought she was full growed an' kinder sharp and pickley?" demanded Amanda. "She's no bigger'n a red squirrel, an' mighty like him in her looks."

"Daddy Brett and mumsy knew, of course, but they let us keep on dreading her, it was such a joke," said Nan.

"Well, laws-a-mussy, Nanny, I sh'd say 'twas a joke!" cried Amanda, beginning to roll with inward laughter. "When I peeked at her, an' she wunk at me, jest like you-all limbs o' mischief, I'clare I frought I'd tumble right down a crack in de flo', I was dat hit-in-a-heep! Well, Miss Ailsa, honey, I'se proud to know you, an,

I hopes you're jes' as good-for-nothin' as these Brett lambs o' mine, yere." With which Amanda wiped her right hand carefully on her checked gingham apron, and tardily gave it to Ailsa in greeting.

Ailsa shook it heartily. "I'm glad to see you, Amanda," she said, "and if I know how to read people, we young Bretts are all out out of one piece."

"It isn't spelled p-e-a-c-e either, Ailsa," said Nan. "To think, Amanda, only to think that this little lively, snip of a girl is the maiden aunt we were all dreading!"

"Sho', Nan; go 'long!" cried Amanda in huge delight. "More maiden dan she is aunt, I reckon!"

"That's just it!" cried Nan, as she and Ailsa turned away. "All girl and no aunt about her! Isn't it perfectly splendiscrumptious, glorimellifluous!"

"Wait till I'm rested, Nan, and I'll make a bigger one!" cried Ailsa. And they left Amanda rolling her eyes and rocking her portly frame in soundless mirth over their nonsense.

CHAPTER III

UNPACKING—MINDS AND TRUNKS

"Now, Nan," said Mrs. Brett, as the girls came back to the dining room, "I think you'd better take Ailsa to her room. Jimmy saw the delivery wagon with her trunk around the corner, so it will be here shortly. And you know, Nan, that there's no reason for insisting on Ailsa's taking the big guest room if, by any chance, she should happen to prefer the little yellow and white room that we tried to make attractive to a possible girl visitor."

"Mumsy!" cried Nan, stopping short. "How perfectly stupid I was! I might have known. Why in the world didn't I guess you were getting that ready for Ailsa? But to think of all the trouble you took with the big room, to carry out the trick!"

"We never think anything is too much trouble to carry out a good joke, we of this branch of the Bretts, Ailsa," explained Mrs. Brett. "However, I am really glad to feel that the guest room is in order for the winter. Show Ailsa both rooms, Nan. It doesn't matter to me which you choose, Ailie."

Ailsa hugged her sister-in-law briefly, but thoroughly. "If Ponce de Leon had ever found you!" she cried. "You're a regular fountain of youth. I don't believe anything matters



"Ailsa, It's Perfectly Glorious to Have You Here!"

(The Little Aunt) (Page 44)

to you, as long as the children have a good time."

"And are good," confessed Mrs. Brett. "I'm afraid my neighbors think I'm shockingly lax. But all their children swarm here, and it's my ambition to make a home that other children will come to and that my own children will stay in, so I'm afraid I shall never improve along the lines of strict housekeeping."

Ailsa gave her a look that her sister-in-law could not construe. "I think I see a light. I saw it almost at once, about as big as a candle; now it's getting to be a regular headlight," she said.

Then she followed Nan, who had preceded her toward the stairs.

"Now this is the regular guest room," Nan explained, throwing open the door. "It's more than twice as big as the other room and ten times more guestroomified; more polite and formal, you know. Take it all in, and then I'll show you the little room."

"I've taken," said Ailsa. "It's a fine room, much nicer than I need. Where's the little one?"

"On the other side of the house, close to the stairs," said Nan, crossing the hall. "One reason I like it is that it's south and sunny."

She threw open the door of the little room and fell back to let Ailsa see it; plainly Nan considered it worth seeing.

Ailsa exclaimed rapturously: "I never, never saw such a darling room! It looks like a sun without any spot on it. It's so dear and happy

looking, as if it could sing. So pure white and bright gold! Like a lovely big field daisy, or a canary bird. May I have this room, really, Nan? I should think you'd take it. Isn't that white and yellow rug the dearest thing with the bird's-eye maple furniture and the brass bed! And just enough of that oiled black wood to set if off!"

"That's mumsy, Ailsa," cried Nan, delighted at this enthusiasm. "She always knows just the touch to give. Of course, you may take this room. I know now that she got it ready for you, and all the while we thought the formal big room was for our formal big aunt!"

Ailsa crossed the white and yellow rug in little skips, depositing her hat and coat, which she carried on a chair. Then she dropped into the white willow rocker with a deep breath of satisfaction, resting her arms on the window sill.

"It's so homey," she said, "and so golden! I shall feel exactly like Cinderella in her golden pumpkin chariot when I'm in this room. There's my trunk coming in."

"It will come up here; someone will tell it to," laughed Nan.

"No expressman is going to set his dusty soles on this rug!" cried Ailsa. "Mayn't he put the trunk outside the door? And then we'll have everything out of it in a jiffy and the boys and I can put it wherever you want it."

"Of course. We wouldn't let you have the trunk in this room; too crowded. It's coming

up on the man's back this minute; I hear one of them bumping and grunting," said Nan.

"That's the trunk," rejoined Ailsa gravely. "It's an unbreakable bump grunt trunk."

And the expressman found the two girls collapsed with laughter over the sound of these last four words, spoken gruffly, with emphasis on the final letters.

"Now," began Ailsa, when the amiable red-faced giant of a truckman had withdrawn, grinning sympathetically, "now for the fun of unpacking! I think it's wonderful how interesting even one's wash rag gets to be when one fishes it out of a trunk after a few hour's separation from it."

"Do you always say 'one' and 'one's' instead of 'you' and 'yours'?" asked Nan.

"I certainly do not!" cried Ailsa. "I happened to remember then and hoped you'd be impressed. But I'll tell the truth, though I lose my little niece's respect."

"You wouldn't get any too much respect from your little niece by fibbing," laughed Nan. "Let's take that whole upper tray out and set it on the bed."

"Just as you say," sighed Ailsa, with her twinkle, though her voice was pensive.

"I did think of chopping up the tray, but we'll take it out whole, if you like."

Whereupon Nan boxed Ailsa's ears as she knelt before the trunk. Then they carried the tray into the room and came back to rifle the trunk further.

It was not long before it was emptied to the bottom and all that had been in it overflowed the yellow and white room in bewildering, but attractive confusion.

"You have lots of drawer room, really, said Nan. "There are three long drawers in the closet, under the shelves, that maple chiffonniere behind the door and two drawers in this princess dresser. And this closet has lots of hanging room."

"Mercy, I don't need all I have!" cried Ailsa. My things look like a great deal more than they are because they are tossed around and are billowly. We'll sort them first, while we talk, and then put away all at once."

They sorted Ailsa's belongings rapidly, Nan in a state of delight too deep for words as she realized that this atmosphere of girlish intimacy had come into her home to stay for a long time. At last Nan sat erect on the floor beside the bed from beneath which she had emerged with a pair of stockings that had rolled under it as far as they could go.

"Ailsa, it's perfectly glorious to have you here!" she cried, suddenly voicing her feeling. "I didn't know we lacked one thing to complete this house, but we did—a sister my own age! Dins can't be chummy like a girl, and Tilly-Pilly is only ten. I'm just beginning to take in what a piece of luck this is!"

"Nice way to take it," cried Ailsa, nodding hard. "I didn't much want to come, if I may

speak right out, now I know what a regular honey pot I've dropped into."

"What made you come?" asked Nan bluntly. "That sounds queer, but I've been wondering. You see it isn't as though we had been knowing one another, we two parts of the family. Father—I don't believe I could say, if you asked me, how many brothers and sisters father has."

"You were going to say that your father never talked about us," said Ailsa. "He didn't know us. You know when my father—your grandfather—married again his two oldest children left home. I'm the youngest of six more children. The other two girls are grown up and gone, have been for a good while. And one of my brothers is married; one is in Colorado, the other is at home."

"How old are you? I meant to ask before," said Nan.

"I was fifteen on Memorial Day," replied Ailsa.

"And I shall be fifteen on Thanksgiving Day!" cried Nan. "Just half a year between us. Only my birthday does not always fall on a holiday, like yours. Ailsa, what perfectly beautiful embroidery and inserting and trimmings you have on your things! Do you make them?"

"No; my mother does—I made some of them. Mother likes beautiful handwork," said Ailsa, smiling at Nan's forgetting the subject in hand at the vision of the gown which Ailsa was refolding.

"How can she get time? A widow, too, for

so many years," sighed Nan. "I'd love fussy, *beautifully* fussy, nightgowns like that, but I couldn't make one to save me, and mumsy doesn't get time to mend us all up; she'd never get time for all that. I have nice, fine little gowns, all alike, gathered with a ribbon at the top and pretty decent lace ruffles at the neck and wrist, but never a smidge of embroidery."

Ailsa's merry face clouded. "It's not easy to tell you, Nan, but I may as well try," she said. "Your mother doesn't get time to make fussy clothes for you, but she has time to join in all your fun and help you out in whatever you're doing, boys as well as you girls—doesn't she?"

Nan nodded hard. "I could see that," Ailsa continued, "and all this fixing up two rooms, and keeping up the joke that I was a stiff old maiden aunt coming, shows how she's just one with you. She's the dearest thing ever! Well, it's the other way about in our house. Mother likes to see me well dressed, she embroiders a great deal and she reads a lot, she belongs to several clubs, bridge clubs and civic improvement things, and an amateur theatrical club, and she's president of the women's suffrage club at home, and of course, anyone who is in all this has a good deal of entertaining to do and being entertained. But my mother never played with me in her life. I'd never think of bothering her with my little good-and-bad times. She has too many irons in the fire to iron out my wrinkles, if ever I'm

crumpled up—which isn't often. So you needn't envy me my pretty underclothes, though I know they're quite nifty for a girl my age, Ailsa laughed, but added seriously: "I'd rather have one day of a chummy, intimate mother like yours, than all the clothes in the world—who wouldn't? I'm not whining; I'm as jolly a girl as you ever saw, but I'm simply telling you. I don't feel particularly well acquainted with my mother. I suppose there must be different ways of being a mother, for so many different kinds of women are mothers. If you're mothering all sorts of outside committees and things you can't possibly have so much time to give one inside little girl. There's a splendid big woman at home, kind of a mixture of a housekeeper and a nurse, Deborah Hopewell is her name, who has looked after me and the brother next older. She looks like one of those Rebecca-at-the-well teapots—short and thick set and brown—but she's all right! I always hunt her up when I've any kind of ache, body or mind. Debby's good and she always gives me good advice, but of course, she had no authority to make me mind. So that's why I'm so bad," Ailsa ended with a chuckle.

"Are you bad, Ailsa? I don't believe you are," cried Nan, who had been listening, breathless, to this explanation of the state of things in Ailsa's home, a state inconceivable to her whose mother had always been the sum of her children's existence, their comrade, adoration, supreme resource and comforter.

"That's for you to find out," nodded Ailsa. "I'm decidedly not a model child."

"A model child would be worse to have in the house than a maiden aunt," cried Nan. "I'm beginning to understand what it is that makes you seem older than I, though you are so little and lively; you've been left to yourself more. I'm sorry—" Nan caught herself up, remembering that it would not do to tell Ailsa she was sorry that her mother was so unmotherly. Instead she asked: "You were going to tell me why you came here this winter, weren't you?"

"Only October," corrected Ailsa. "Yes, I was. I can't tell you precisely, though. There's some sort of trouble; it's about money. Did you know my father made your father my guardian?"

"No, indeed!" Nan shook her head violently. "I wasn't five when he died."

"No, for I was only just five," said Ailsa. "He appointed 'my eldest son, Augustus Brett, guardian over my daughter Ailsa,' that's what his will said. And once a year my mother had to send her accounts to your father."

"It's just like him not to speak of it. He's as full of fun as he can be, but we children never hear him speak of business, especially if anyone else is mixed up in it," said Nan.

"There's something mixed up in this business, now," Ailsa said. "I don't know what it is, but there's some sort of trouble. Mother was quite angry, and she always is angry if

anyone thinks she is mistaken. All I know is that she told me that I must go to spend the winter with my brother Augustus, and 'make the best of it'. So here I am. I'm afraid there won't be any worst to make of it; it will all be best and make itself without any help from me."

Nan jumped up at this and executed a few steps of the sailors' hornpipe.

"So you are to spend the winter!" she cried. I've been wondering about that. I'm going to send for Mona to-night to start you getting acquainted. Mona Chapman, that is; she's my best friend. How about boys, Ailsa? Do you like boys?"

Ailsa laughed. "I like them when they're the right sort," she said. "I'm proud to say I can have as good a time without them as I can with them, when there's a lively crowd of nice girls. All girls like to have the boys admire them, if they will own up, so I own up to it, here and now. But I'd hate to be the sort of girl that will put herself out to any extent to be noticed by any boy! It's my opinion that a boy ought to be honored when a girl notices him. Dinsmore must bring lots of boys here. Do we have to begin to-night, Nannie?"

"Well, I'd like to have Mona and you meet just as soon as we can manage it," Nan said. She's the dearest thing! I'm so glad and thankful you won't always want boys! Dins does bring them here in shoals—but some of them are my friends, too." Ailsa laughed and

Nan went on, blushing: "But I feel just as you do about it. I know a girl here who can't rest till she gets acquainted with every single boy that comes along, no matter how stupid he is, or how bad his manners are. The worst of it is that the boys know it and laugh at her. I hate to have a girl make the boys laugh at her, don't you?"

"Of course; it makes me furious to see a girl silly," agreed Ailsa. "Nan, is my brother Gus rich?"

"No, but we don't really know it," laughed Nan. "Daddy Brett has a good income, but that isn't riches. We have plenty, though. All the clothes we need and money to spend for pleasure. We keep only Amanda, but mumsy does a great deal around the house and I'm beginning to help more than I did. Tilly is useful, considering she's so thin and only ten, and such a terror. We call her 'the Pill.' It's partly because her middle name is Pillsbury, but it's mostly because that's what she is. My two Brett parents seem to give away a lot. I often wonder how they manage it. You'll love your brother and sister, Ailsa; it isn't because they belong to me, but I honestly believe there isn't anyone else in all the United States equal to them. But we're not rich, certainly not. Not rich, but we get almost everything we want, and it's all paid for; maybe we are a little rich."

Ailsa laughed at these conflicting statements. "The reason I asked is that I am not going to be a bother here, if I can help it. I don't know

much about being useful. Mother took an apartment two years ago and we have two maids, so there isn't anything for me to do. This house looks so roomy and real after an apartment! Our rooms all run along the street, so they are light, but—I suppose it's foolish, but it never seems like a real home. I have a string of gold beads and the apartment looks just like them! "It's so trying not to be able to tell one's necklace and one's home apart."

"Ailsa! You ridiculous girl!" laughed Nan. But inexperienced though she was, Nan began to see that real loneliness and well-founded dissatisfaction underlay Ailsa's chatter, that her lively brain held other thoughts than mischievous nonsense, and she vaguely wondered if her coming to her brother's might not bring forth good to "the maiden aunt."

"In crowded cities people have to live in apartments, but they're not needed in small places. Where are my other nieces and my nephews?" Ailsa demanded. "I should think Tilly and Gussie would be up here; little girls love to rummage."

"Mamma is probably keeping them away, so we can get acquainted easier," said Nan. We're well enough acquainted now to let them come; I'll call them, if you like."

"Imagine her thinking of that!" cried Ailsa admiringly. "Nan, I'm going to fall head over heels in love with my sister Molly!"

"You'll be crazy about her, said Nan positively.

"I must find something to call her," Ailsa went on. "I've got to call her something intimate, like a sister, yet Molly sounds a little too free, especially as you are my age and her daughter, and we're right here together. I wish I knew the exactly-right word!"

"We call her lots of names, all meaning that she's the dearest thing! Whatever you called her would mean that, after you knew her," added Nan wisely, "as long as the word stood for her, because that's what she is." Nan opened the door. "Brettlettes! Tilly, Gussie, boys, want to come up here?" she called. "Oh, I might have known!" she added as Tilly and Gussie arose from the fourth step down, having been sitting on the stairs patiently awaiting this summons.

"Mamma said we must not make a sound," explained Gussie. "She said Tilly and I mustn't bother Ailsa. But we wanted awful much to come."

"Mamma thought Ailsa ought to get to know you first," added Tilly, "but I thought we'd have helped you make her at home. But mamma said not. And now you've got all her things put away, pretty much!"

"Here are things Nan hasn't seen, Tilly," said Ailsa. "This box is yours and this is Gussie's, and this one is Nan's, the smallest though she is the biggest girl."

Nan beamed her gratitude as she slipped a moonstone curiously set in a ring upon her finger. "It's just like yours! I noticed yours and loved

it the minute you took your glove off downstairs!" she cried rapturously.

Little Gussie was crimson with inarticulate joy over a tiny locket and chain. Tilly pranced and shook her hand to display the slender bangle that was her gift. Funny Tilly was never as awkward as when she was exuberantly happy; her long limbs never seemed to harmonize with her emotions.

Mrs. Brett came running up the stairs, out of breath, beaming. "I hear happiness!" she cried as she came. "What's going on, chickens? I hope you are comfortably bestowed, Ailie?"

"She is comfortably bestowing, mumsy!" cried Nan. "Do see what she has brought us!" Ailsa arose to offer her sister-in-law the rocker by the window with a look half shy, wholly appealing and affectionate.

"I'm a good deal more than comfortable. I never saw a room before that the sunshine shone *out* of, instead of *into* it. It's such a happy, golden room! I wonder whether I'm ever going to be able to thank you, for everything, Molly-Mary?"

The little pet name came unsought; Ailsa never called this new sister anything else. Mrs. Brett accepted the name and the thanks with one of her hearty laughs and a delighted look that her efforts to make her guest happy had so well succeeded. But she was a little woman all compact of quick intuitions, born of her warm heart, her eagerness to bestow happiness. She felt something in Ailsa beyond her present

knowledge of the girl and instantly went out to it. She put one arm about this new little sister and hugged her heartily.

"Nothing to thank me for, Ailsie child," she said. "This is a happy household; just you be part of its happiness, getting and giving, and that's all I ask—except a wee bit of love for us who are going to be so fond of you!"

"I guess I shall pay my toll that way, if that's all!" said Ailsa fervently.

Mona Chapman did not come that evening to meet Ailsa after all. Mrs. Brett suggested a first evening "entirely Bretts," and Dinsmore ably seconded her motion. "Seats in the family circle for me this first night," he said, and they saw that Ailsa had no desire to extend her new acquaintanceship yet beyond the family.

She proved to be a remarkable little pianist, playing with a skill and intelligence beyond her years. Nan played prettily, but Ailsa played with little less than genius. On the other hand, Nan surpassed her in singing for Nan's sweet, contralto voice and quick ear was a rare gift.

"I see our winter!" cried Dins, who really loved music. "Ailsa playing the piano, me getting up the violin, Jimmy blowing something decent out of that octoroon of his—carina, or whatever it is; that potatoish thing. Ham Gravy will come over with his cornet—the fellow's name is Hamilton Graves, Ailsa, but of course we chaps can't lose such a chance as that name gives us! Giddy'll be sure to get out his concertina—that boy's name is Gideon

Davis; naturally we prefer Giddy for him, Aunt Ailsa. Dad can play the flute like Orpheus or Pan, or whoever was the best piper in that old Greek pipe dream, if he will take the trouble. Nan will sing the solos. Say, honest, no joking, we'll have music on the half shell this winter!"

"And I can do fancy dancing," cried Ailsa. "We'll find a charity for an excuse, and get up a Christmas entertainment.

"That's talking!" cried Dins in high delight. "Nothing slow about you. First time I ever understood why we are told to 'go to the ant, thou sluggard.' Aunt Ailsa'd galvanize any old sluggard."

Ailsa was not the Ailsa of the afternoon, alone with Nan. There was no vestige of her having had in all her short life a serious thought, much less a lonely moment. Her face was flashing with fun and high spirits, her eyes were so bright that nobody could have been sure what was their color. Her cheeks burned a bright crimson, her whole lithe, little body was quivering with movement as she chattered. The young Bretts watched her, entranced and wondering, the older Bretts found her no less interesting.

Mrs. Brett had a habit of paying Nan a short visit every night after she was tucked away in bed, when mother and daughter exchanged confidences and talked over the day's experiences. Nan shared every thought with her mother; the love between them was close and intimate.

To-night when the mother came and seated herself on the edge of Nan's bed, Nan repeated

to her all that Ailsa had said in the afternoon.

"She seemed gay enough to-night, but I almost thought that she was not quite happy," Nan ended.

"She is a little dynamo of high spirits," said Mrs. Brett. "Those people hide their heavy-hearted moments; for that matter they can't stay heavy-hearted long. What you tell me makes the little aunt more interesting. She is extraordinarily clever and pretty. I imagine we shall find her making a great difference in our household. And I imagine there is a great deal more in her than shows on the surface. I must make her love me. I wonder if she would let me visit her, as I do you, at bedtime? It is such a cozy time to talk!"

"Oh, mumsy, I'm not going to be mean or jealous, but—don't cut off any of my dear time with you!" cried Nan. "And Ailsa adores you already."

"I'll manage not to lose any of our dusky hour, Nanny; it is as dear to me as to you. But I must get as close as I can to this elfin girl, especially if her own mother is so blind as not to enjoy the best thing a woman can have—her little daughter's fullest love and confidence. But you and I are always to be you and I—Nan and her one mother!" said Mrs. Brett, with her good night kiss.

Nan fell asleep pitying Ailsa that she could never be more than this dear woman's young sister-in-law, and resolving to share her mother with Ailsa without a grudging pang.

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCING THE MAIDEN AUNT

"My idea is this." Dinsmore spoke out of a passing silence at the breakfast table as if he were continuing a discussion, although no one had broached his subject. "We'll get a few of the girls and boys around here to meet our aunt. We'll tell them that she has a mania for youthful company and that they've got to stand by us—Mona Chapman and Kit Flanders and Ham and Gid, anyhow. They'll hate like ginger to come, but they'll do it, brace themselves to play up to a lady of uncertain age who 'loves young people!' You know the sort; it's no slouch of a job to talk to those people who condescend right down to your level and try to be one with you—especially when they feign an interest in sport! I'll make the boys believe that's the kind Aunt Ailsa is, and Nan must give the girls the same steer. We'll make them believe that Aunt Ailsa 'll be mortally offended if our chums aren't nice to her. They'll agree to do their best to please our venerable relative, for our sakes. And they'll walk right up to their martyrdom, too."

"Like Roman gladiolas," observed Tilly, plainly proud of her knowledge, which made it the more mortifying to have it hailed with a shout of laughter.

"Try gladiators, Pill, dear," advised Nan. "If you'd accent that word right, say glad-É-ola, you wouldn't mix it up with gladiator. That's a dandy plan, Dins! Can't you see their faces when they're presented to 'our aunt Ailsa, Miss Brett?' "

"Can I?" cried Dins rapturously. "Ham especially. Besides, it will be our last chance to get the benefit of the hoax Aunt Ailsa is."

"Hoax! Nephew Dinsmore, be careful! I'm perfectly genuine," said Ailsa. "However, I forgive you for the sake of your plan. I'll like to meet your friends in a jolly way like that. I'd dread—a little bit!—a formal meeting. It doesn't show, or I hope it doesn't, but I'm a tiny bit shy."

Dins laughed. "Not much it doesn't show!" he cried.

"You can't tell about shyness," said Nan. "I know when I'm scared I chatter and carry on more, because if you stop and let the shyness get ahead of you, that's the end of it!"

"That's it!" cried Ailsa. "I was in a blue funk when I got here yesterday, so I had to be lively. Though it took most of the fright out of me when Gus told me you were looking for a maiden aunt. Children, why do I hear nothing of school? Is it possible that you are not scholars—at your age?" she added, with a resumption of "the aunt voice."

"Sister Ailsa," Mr. Brett replied for his children, "all your nephews and nieces are at school this winter, except Nan. She had ty-

phoid fever in July and she is to be kept at home this winter. I hope that you will see that she is faithful to the lessons that she is to learn at home. Even Gussie has begun her education. She can read that 'the cat ran, and the dog hops, and that the bird sits on its nest'—and sometimes she can read it quite right, even when you cover the picture of the cat and the dog and the bird!"

"And I can count," boasted Gussie, missing the point of her father's account of her accomplishments. "I can count 'way up, an' make figgers—fig-yours," she corrected herself, "jes' like my copy, 'f only six don't turn wrong way. Sometimes I make six an' J with their crook on the wrong side of 'em."

"Isn't it funny?" sympathized Ailsa heartily. "I've known lots of people, little people, who couldn't keep six and J faced the right way."

"How about your own education?" hinted Dins.

"Scrappy," said Ailsa promptly. "I've been to school quite a good deal, but last winter mother let me try lessons at home, with a tutor—ought you say tutotrix when its a woman? She was a splendid tutotrix, that's sure, and she couldn't help it that I learned most about the things that interested me most. I had begun again with Miss Leland this year. She loved best the very things I did—language, English history, English literature, Greek and Roman things—history or mythology, anything about them—and anything about Florence, and Rome

and Venice in the Middle Ages. And music! Miss Leland played gloriously! It's lucky I always loved to read, for you can't help learning something, if you read real books. Mercy! You didn't want me to give you a catalogue of what's inside my head! Father left a splendid library," added Ailsa, turning to her brother.

Mr. Brett nodded. "Father was nearer being a bookworm than any other business man I ever knew," he said.

Jimmy, the silent, unexpectedly spoke at this point. "I should think you had a terribly good education, Ailsa," he said firmly. "I should like to read all the books there are."

"Some day you'll have to visit me and read your grandfather's books, Jimsy," laughed Ailsa. A troubled look crossed her face; she glanced at her brother. "They are not my books, of course: they belong to—to—Brett Brothers," she said.

Mr. Brett gave the small sister a warm look.

"Father gave us all a love for books, Ailsa, and that's worth more than any collection of books," he said.

"Not my brothers—I mean my other brothers, Gus," said Ailsa, flushing at her slip of the tongue. "None of them, nor my sisters, ever seemed to care one bit about that glorious library. The books have been boxed and stored since mother went into the apartment to live."

Dins looked at his watch. "'Scuse us, Aunt Ailsa, please—and mumsy. Time we were starting, kids," he said, pushing back his chair.

"Get the boys for to-night; I'll see the girls," Nan called after him as he went out of the room.

Nan started out on her errand in the middle of the forenoon; she knew when she might see her friends, Mona Chapman and Kitty Flanders, between recitations at the school which had been hers and to which she would go back after this year. "I can't take you with me, Ailsa, to ask the girls to come to meet you, of course. But it will be the first and last time we shall not go together everywhere, everywhere you care to go. Mumsy will take care of you," said Nan, departing.

"If Molly-Mary won't find me in the way I'd rather stay with her than go out," said Ailsa with a look that showed that she had spoken truly when she had said that she was sometimes a little shy.

"Only too glad to have you around, small sister," smiled Mrs. Brett. "I'm such a busy person in the morning that you'll have to fly around like one of those little cash baskets which skim along the wires overhead in the dry goods shops, if you want to keep up with me."

"When it comes to flying around, Molly-Mary, I am distinctly in it," cried Ailsa.

"You're quite as slangy as my reprehensible Bretts!" cried Mrs. Brett. "But I excuse Nan and Tilly on the ground of catching it from their brothers. How am I to excuse you?"

"I have more brothers than Nan and Tilly put together!" triumphed Ailsa, and Mrs. Brett yielded the point, not knowing how to go about

reckoning how many brothers Nan and Tilly would have "put together."

Ailsa found that her sister-in-law had spoken truly of the busy hours of her morning. Nan had certain appointed tasks, setting her own room in order, dusting the drawing room and dining room, watering flowers, arranging fresh flowers for the table, picking up and putting in place the many small articles that the masculine members of the family had used the evening before and left where they had used them. This first morning Ailsa helped Nan as far as she was able, inwardly resolving to become able to help her a great deal more after she had been a week within this household. It was Ailsa's first experience of seeing anyone but servants do practical tasks from necessity, not choice. She was as untrained in usefulness as a canary bird But in this merry, happy-go-lucky household, with five children growing up in it, at various stages of the process, and with only good Amanda to do its work, domestic occupation was not a matter of choice for its mistress nor for a daughterly daughter of that mistress.

Mrs. Brett had a breezy way of getting through a rapid succession of tasks, humming as she worked; it gave an impression of enjoyment that made Ailsa wonder. She followed her big new-found sister about and, when Mrs Brett reached the stage of sitting down to mend Jimmy's jagged rent in a jacket, sat in a low chair beside her, her face in her hands, propped by her elbows on the chair arm, watching the

swift scissors that trimmed the edges of the tear before a patch should be set under it. Ailsa spoke before she thought: "You'd actually think you liked it, Molly-Mary!"

"What? A torn jacket? Far from it, Ailie, my dear!" laughed Mrs. Brett.

"I didn't know I was going to say that," said Ailsa blushing. "I meant mending—and everything you've been doing."

Mrs. Brett stole a glance at the keen, pretty little dark face beside her, seeing more and further than she revealed.

"I suppose in a sense I do like it, Ailsa," she said quietly. "I like to be busy, and more often than not I enjoy household tasks. But there are other moods, tired ones, out of tune ones—they will come, you know!—when I have to use spurs, mental spurs. However, in one sense I always like to do what I must. I want to keep home just as homey as it can be and so I like to do what makes it that, even when I'm disgruntled with the special task in hand. Can you understand that distinction?"

Ailsa nodded. "Yes," she said. "This is an awfully homey house. You're the hominess of it, Molly-Mary, I do believe! Mother would hate it, all this."

Mrs. Brett understood. "There's no reason for doing unpleasant things without one must," she said. "Your brother is only able to afford the kind of home we have. We have to help in it, or else lose ever so much comfort. It's worth while doing unpleasant things for the

sake of greater pleasantness to have a pretty, comfortable home for us all, with a margin to afford music, books, entertainment for the children. Besides," this dear woman added, with a contented laugh, "that's my business in the world. I'm the hausfrau and the hausmutter; and I'd be a nice person if I did not try a little bit to fill my place, wouldn't I?"

"I believe I've always thought such things weren't—Oh, Molly-Mary, it sounds horrid, but —weren't quite right for a lady," hesitated Ailsa.

"Dear little goosie," laughed Molly-Mary, "if a lady is a rich lady, who can afford to hire all the service she needs, she'd better spend her strength on other tasks than dusting and darning. But if she can't hire a great deal done, what is there on earth better for her to do than to make a happy, well-kept home in which her boys and girls shall grow up good and useful men and women? Do you know any greater work a woman can do than to train up men and women to be true and good and kind, honest, useful? And how can they be all these things unless their home is sound and sweet?"

"Molly-Mary," said Ailsa earnestly, "I can hear my head sort of creak and squeak, my brain is stretching so! Of course there isn't anything better. But—well, there's one sure thing, and that is that you're the biggest peach this girl ever saw!"

"Poor little this-girl!" cried Mrs. Brett. "Then I'm afraid she's never seen anything but

gnarly crabapples! I hear Nan's slam of the front door!"

Nan flew up stairs and hugged her mother as if she had not seen her for a week. Then she dragged Ailsa to her feet and waltzed her around the room.

"Mona and Kit are coming," she cried. "I saw Dins down the street and he said the boys were coming, too. They're all perfectly sick over the ordeal ahead of them. Kit declared she couldn't possibly try to entertain my aunt, but Mona said she would, though she thought it was a pretty hard test of friendship, and she made Kit see that they had to do it for me, or else be disloyal. And Dins said the boys were worse. He only got Ham and Giddy by promising them something in return—he wouldn't tell me what it was. Anyway, they're coming, all four of them. I was trying to decide on the way home how we'd better fix it up. Shall we have Ailsa in the room when they come, or shall we bring her in afterward, mumsy?"

Mrs. Brett dropped her sewing, giving her whole mind to the problem which Nan presented. It struck Ailsa as a kind of miracle the way her sister-in-law made herself absolutely one with her children.

"If she were in the room, and the visitors arrived separately—and they'd hardly get her together—then the cream would be partly skimmed for the later arrivals. I believe it would be better to get them together and then bring Ailsa

into the room," she announced her opinion after brief consideration.

"Wise mumsy! Of course that's so," cried Nan.

"Come over to my room and tell me what you'd rather I'd wear, Nan," said Ailsa.

"I want you to wear something that will make you look your prettiest, your gayest, your youngest, but nothing so simple that it won't be fetching; not childish, you know," said Nan rapidly.

"Been thinking it over, I see!" observed Ailsa. "Sounds as though I'd have to wear two or three frocks, one over the other, and drop one every once in a while. No one costume could fill that programme. Come pick out what you like best, though."

Nan threw herself into the solution of her problem with the enthusiasm proper to it. Ailsa's gowns had to be displayed over again, for Nan said she couldn't possibly remember them from the day before clearly enough to be sure in which she wanted her little aunt to appear before her friends' startled eyes.

"Well, one of these two," Nan announced at last. "I'd like to see which is more becoming to you—I'm afraid it must be both of them! Try them on, Ailsa; it won't take long."

One was a straight, simply made little frock of soft silk, a pale corn color, but its simplicity was contradicted by touches of embroidery in gorgeous nasturtium shades that made the costume look as if it had been made by magic

out of one of the glowing October maples. The rival of this dress was a marvellous shade of red chiffon, accordion pleated, so full that the skirt floated, swung and fell in brilliant grace around Ailsa's lithe little figure.

"Which?" asked Ailsa as she doffed the autumnal gown and emerged through the soft abundance of the red.

"I can't decide!" cried Nan. "Why, they're —they're too beautiful to be true!"

"I don't want to wear either, Nan. Let's keep them for a party or something. I'll tell you! For that concert we said last night we'd give sometime! I have a nice little white thing I wear over a crimson slip; it's pretty and it doesn't make a fuss about it, the way these two rather splendid gowns do. Let me wear that. And it is really more girlish, if you want to bowl these girls and boys over with a kiddy aunt," said Ailsa, with a perception that the "rather splendid gowns" provided by her mother for her necessary appearances among "rather splendid" people would look out of place in this simpler setting.

"All right," agreed Nan reluctantly. "I believe they wouldn't get acquainted with you as soon if you were clothed in 'more-than-oriental splendour,' like the Parsee's hat in 'How the Rhino Got His Skin.' Oh, don't you love the Just-So Stories? And, anyway, they'll see these lovely dresses later. All right, wear the white. May I see it?"

The precaution of keeping Ailsa out of sight

till she could be presented to all her visitors simultaneously that night proved to be unnecessary. The two boys had called for the two girls and the four thus arrived together at the Brett house, fortifying one another.

"Auntie is upstairs," said Nan, welcoming them. "Put your things in here, in the little room, girls. Give them to me."

"We won't take them off; we can't stay long," said Kitty Flanders, in an unnatural tone. She glanced at Hamilton Graves and Gideon Davis and the two boys frowned at her significantly.

"Oh, say, don't act like that!" Dins urged them, speaking low, but with an air of anxious pleading. "Aunt Ailsa knows you're our special chums and what'll she think if you don't stay? She'll think it's on her account and get offended; that's what she'll do. Take your things off and spend the evening, for mercy's sake."

"You won't mind telling me, Nan darling: Is she so fearfully cranky?" whispered Mona, as she and Kit divested themselves of their outer garments in dismay.

"No, not what I'd call cranky," said Nan with a great effect of candor. "But—well, you'll see the minute you set eyes on her. She's little, dark, quick in her ways——"

"Sounds waspish," commented Gid. "Maiden auntish, I suppose."

"Oh, well, do be nice to her," begged Nan. "And don't treat her like a middle-aged lady;

she wants to be treated like one of ourselves, so don't be stiff."

"Limbering sort of an order!" growled Ham. "Nobody ever could behave like anything but a clothes horse after that sort of instructions."

"Do the best you can," urged Dins. "We'll be grateful, even if you don't quite hit the bull's eye. Who's going to ask Aunt Ailsa to come down, sis?"

"Perhaps you'd better, you or Jim. She's nice to me, of course, but—well, one of you boys go. Tell Jimmy," said Nan.

"You poor, poor angel!" murmured Kit Flanders with profound sympathy. "I can see it's worse than you feared it would be."

"It's different," said Nan, turning away with a choke in her voice and not quickly enough to keep the girls from seeing that her face was crimson. They glanced at each other and shook their heads, following Nan into the family sitting room as she signalled to them wordlessly. Jimmy had gone to fetch the maiden aunt. Mrs. Brett sat by the table, frankly idle, a most unusual thing for her to be. Mr. Brett lay on the couch enjoying a cigar and smiling with half closed lids. Tilly was holding Gussie fast, with the air of a gaoler; the younger child was giggling wildly, the elder looked so serious that anyone who knew Tilly would have suspected mischief afoot had they noticed her, for Tilly always grew solemn in proportion to the mischief she was planning.

Ham and Gid sat down stiffly, then, remembering Nan's plea, immediately tried to assume easy attitudes, with the result that they looked as if they were waiting to be led to the electric chair. Nor was the two girls' air of elegant ease more convincing. Nan and Dins retired to the rear of the room; they said afterward that they were on the verge of apoplexy, and the color of their faces bore out their statement.

The portiere at the door moved; Jimmy drew it back, then gave place to the lady whom he was escorting to the library. Mona, Kit, Ham and Gid sprang to their feet, with an exclamation from one of them. There stood in the doorway a girl, looking younger than Nan. dressed all in white with a glow below it, "something like a lamp with a white shade," Gid said later. She wore a crimson ribbon behind her ears, where her dark braids fastened. She was pretty, as pretty as an elf, and like one in her light quick motions. Her eyes fairly scintillated with fun, she was laughing. Instead of introducing her the younger Bretts fairly yelled. Dins threw himself headlong into a big chair and kicked ecstatically. Nan flew at Mona and shook her in intense enjoyment of the joke. Tilly and Gussie jumped up and down and, as they truthfully said, "hollered." Jimmy, the escort, stood on his head in the hall. Mrs. Brett, laughing like the youngsters, came to the rescue, saying:

"Mona and Kitty, this is my sister-in-law, Ailsa Brett. Ailsa, dear, these are Nan's best

friends, Mona Chapman and Kitty Flanders. And these are Dins' cronies, Hamilton Graves and Gideon Davis. What do you think of the maiden aunt, Mona, Kit, Ham, Gid? Say something quick, Ailsa; you'll prove fatal to them!"

"All right," cried Ailsa. "I'll make friends with them, if they'll let me."

She came forward holding out her hand. The boys were nearest and Ham took it absent-mindedly. "For the sake of Mike!" ejaculated Ham slowly. "Are you a girl?"

"No; I'm a Jarley waxwork!" cried Ailsa.

"I think it will kill me!" cried Kit, in extreme earnestness. But there was no resisting the magnetism, the charm of this flashing, laughing, blushing elfish "maiden aunt." Mona, rallying, fell instantly head over heels in love with the new girl, in the reaction from the shock of finding her a girl and so very new. "Oh, I guess we will make friends!" she cried, and kissed Ailsa.

Then the four girls had, what the boys described as "a hugging match," though the spirit that moved them to pound one another on the backs was precisely the same. The joke was such a good one, and it was so good in another sense, so good that Ailsa was what she was in all ways sure to add to the fun of the winter before them! In over-flowing delight the girls hugged one another and the boys pounded one another's backs till the exuberance of the moment was somewhat cooled and they could breathlessly sit down to enjoy it more quietly.

"We'll be a club this winter, just us. Before any of the other boys and girls get onto us, let's form one right now," said Gid.

"Four girls and only three boys; there ought to be another boy, anyway, and maybe there'd better be more than eight," said Nan.

"There's Jim and me," observed Tilly to no one in particular and without undue fussiness about grammar. "Just because I'm younger than Nan I can't get in. I bet there's more'n four or five years difference in the ages of people in grown up clubs. Ain't it funny? I wonder when you get old enough so it doesn't make any difference? And I can do 'most anything Nan does!"

"Tilly, please not ain't!" implored Mrs. Brett. "Never mind, daughterkins; some day you'll reap the benefit of your denials. When you are thirty-odd you'll be glad to say: 'Oh, no; not Mona Chapman and Katharine Flanders! I never went about with them; they're my sister Anne's age.' You've no notion how glad you'll be to fall back on the fact that they were too old for you to play with."

The older girls laughed, but Tilly looked unconvinced. "I'd just a lief say I had fun with them, though they were older," said that sharp child.

"We said last night we'd give a charity concert this winter. We might have a musical club," said Nan. "Ailsa can play—well, how she can play! Play something, Ailsa; something good and lively."

Ailsa obligingly got up. She played a Hungarian dance that made sitting still impossible.

"Why not dance?" cried Mrs. Brett. "I'll play for you."

The piano stood close to the library door in the drawing room, and equally close to the dining room. It could be heard as well in one of the three rooms as in another. The Brett house seemed designed, as well as furnished and run, expressly for the pleasures of a lively crowd of young folks. The Bretts and their friends were always dancing. The three boys pushed back the dining room table and rolled back the rug, proving that they were used to this preparation.

Mrs. Brett played as she did everything else, spiritedly, clearly, blithely. Her fingers had not grown stiff though they were such busy ones; she never let them lose their skill, at least skill sufficient to give her children and their friends a dance, or an accompaniment to their singing.

"Come on, daddybrett! You have to dance or else we shall be one short," Nan summoned her father. "Four big girls and three big boys; Jimmy and Tilly won't have a partner unless you come in."

"I'll come," Mr. Brett sighed, pretending a reluctance he did not feel as he pulled himself together. "But we must have one round of Paul Jones, with an odd dancer, to let the baby have one sip of the cup. Then Gussie must go right to bed, and go to sleep to get big enough to sit up for two dances next year." He smiled

at Gussie, who was looking dismal, and she brightened and smiled back again.

"All right," she said cheerfully. "I didn't want to go to bed at once, but I won't tease not to go at twice."

Then the dance began, young and elder ones as merry as grigs. When it was over the acquaintance of her callers with "the maiden aunt" was not only made, but fully grown. It was not strange, Ailsa thought, enjoying, yet watching the merry kindliness of her new-found family, that Mona, Kit and these two boys "just about lived at our house," as Dins informed her that they did.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW GIRL

Ailsa came, she was seen and she conquered! Every girl knows what an advantage it is to be a new girl. While the newness lasts the is interesting, especially if she is new in a small place, or a resort. After the novelty wears off it depends on what the eager investigators of her qualities find in her as to whether she holds the prominence her arrival gave her, or drops down to the level of just a girl.

Ailsa Brett was absorbingly interesting to Nan and Dins' friends. She had the twofold advantage of being a novelty and being a girl, when everybody had been on the lookout for a crabbed person of doubtful age. But Ailsa had that in her which would have given her prominence among her mates if she had fallen among them in a gray cocoon to deaden her approach and to conceal her from instant recognition. Pretty, clever, graceful, over-flowing with life and spirits, she added to these gifts that intangible, but particularly vital quality which is called charm. There was no doubt of it; Ailsa was "a success" in Renwyck from the start. Nan received a telephone call from Mona Chapman the morning after she had met Ailsa.

"Can't you come over this morning, Nan?" and her tone was urgent. "Come and walk to

school with me. It won't take long and I can't possibly wait till afternoon to see you."

"Yes, I'll go. I have to take an order down in town for mumsy, anyway. Alone?" Nan telephoned back.

"What? Oh, yes; please, alone, this time. Good bye," Mona replied.

"Now, Nannie, I want you to tell me every single thing about her," Mona began, tucking her hand close and cosily through Nan's arm. She was waiting on the steps for her friend to appear. "Isn't she great? We're all four of us crazy about her. And such a surprise! We had no idea. Isn't it fine for you? But don't you go to liking her better than me—not that I'd blame you! I'm simply nowhere beside Ailsa Brett!"

Mona was one of those pretty, confiding creatures, amiable, without great depth or strength of character, who are spoken of as "sweet girls," and whom their girl friends pet and protect. Nan loved Mona devotedly and hung upon her little figure all sorts of noble traits and deep emotions, for which little Mona had no capacity. That sort of friendship between girls keeps up beautifully as long as the stronger one goes on attributing to the other these creations of an ideal. But when the dreamer wakes up there are sure to be tearful times; the shallower girl is blamed for her deficiencies, not quite fairly, since she is not responsible for the spectacles through which her friend saw her.

Now Nan squeezed Mona's arm reproachfully as she cried: "Mona, dearest, I wish you would not say such things, even in fun! I know you don't, you can't believe them, but I hate to hear you say anything like that. You know I couldn't care for any other girl as I do for you. And Ailsa is different; she's in the family. I don't know just how to reckon her; it's ridiculous, of course, to think of her as an aunt. She's daddy's sister, so I think I'll stretch a point and consider her mine. At any rate, she can't take your place! Ailsa is a darling, that's sure, but you're—you're my Mona. It's lovely to know, as mumsy says, that nobody can take anybody else's place, not exactly. I was wondering if you could possibly ever think, when you saw—as you will see—me loving Ailsa, that I've gone back on you the least bit? Please let us settle it right here! I shall love Ailsa dearly; I know it, but I shall never let anyone else but you be my best, my most intimate friend. So promise, Mona, you won't ever, ever imagine I do."

Poor Nan was in desperate earnest, looking pretty and excited as she spoke, and she waited eagerly for her friend's assurance. Mona had the coquette's instinct of playing with and on a nature more earnest than her own. She shook her head.

"I don't know, Nan," she said. "You don't think so now, but how can you tell? As I said, Ailsa is a thousand times nicer than I am; she's bewitching. I can't promise never to think

you like her better than me, because some day I may see you do."

Nan looked distressed. "Oh, dear, oh, dear me, Mona! I wish you'd just be sure, once for all! I never change, and you ought to know it. I suppose I must just let it go, let time show. But unless you're sure of me you'll imagine Ailsa has taken your place when you see us having good times together, she living with me and all! And though it won't be true, if you think it is it will be just as bad," she sighed.

"Oh, mercy, Nan, that's all right!" exclaimed Mona. "I think Ailsa's really a peach, a wonder; she's great! I wanted you to tell me all about her, everything. The boys asked lots of questions going home last night and I couldn't answer one. I told them I hadn't heard a lisp from you because you were keeping dark to surprise us with a lovely maiden, instead of a maiden aunt. Now tell me all you know about Ailsa. I'm going to tell the other girls at school about her. They'll all be rushing to your house in swarms and droves to get acquainted."

Nan laughed, throwing her anxiety as to future jealousy to the winds.

"I don't know as much as I ought," she began, "because my father did not stay at home after his father married Ailsa's mother and he has never known his half brothers and sisters. Ailsa's mother is a great society and club woman. They are richer than we are, that's sure, but I suspect we're far better off—happier, you know. Ailsa shows she has done pretty

much as she pleased. Her mother isn't the duck ours is, that's plain. Ailsa isn't intimate with her; she said as much."

"You know we all say there isn't any other mother quite the way yours is, Nan," said Mona. "I wouldn't change with you, because nobody would change her mother, but there's no house in Renwyck we all love to go to like yours. Has Ailsa lots of nice clothes and jewelry?"

"Her clothes are perfectly scrumptious!" cried Nan fervently. "She hasn't much jewelry but what she has is fine. Now that's all I know about her, really, Mona. Except that she's funny, and sunny, and as bright as she can be, friendly, and so full of cute little ways that you feel like jumping up and squeezing her every few minutes."

"I know that part of it myself," agreed Mona. "You haven't told me much; nothing wildly new and interesting. But Ailsa Brett's new enough and interesting enough. I'm going to tell the girls she is here and bring them to see her; shall I?"

"Of course," said Nan. "Here's where I turn off, Mona. We'll have a splendid winter. Ailsa talks of all sorts of things we can do. I imagine she'll wake us up."

"Never was alseep," laughed Mona, waving her hand as she turned toward the school entrance.

By contrast with the condition of Renwyck girls after Ailsa had become one of them it

really did seem as though they had been asleep before.

All the girls in Mona and Kit's class—which had been Nan's class, also—came to see Nan's surprising "maiden aunt." They came in pairs and then the first callers came again to bring the others, till it seemed as though the house were alive with girls after school hours.

"It's entirely different from at home," said Ailsa in high glee. "They're much stiffer there. Or else I never knew the limber girls! Maybe that's it. Mother's friends are rather formal and I knew their daughters. Perhaps Renwyck is a more heart-to-heart place. Or is it because we're Molly-Mary's girls? I believe it's that, Nan! Your blessed mother, my sister-in-law, is so warming she'd thaw a Simplon."

"I thought it was simpleton," said Tilly, in good faith, striving after information.

"Simplon Pass, in the Alps, Tilly-Pilly," explained Ailsa. "That's one of my careless learned 'lusions! I want to make you think I know a lot. It's an icy spot, and that's all I know about it, to be honest."

"It hasn't anything to do with anything, except the girls are stuck on you," said Jimmy unexpectedly; he had a way of coming in like an oracle when nobody thought he was hearing what was said.

"Truthful James," murmured Nan, for this was one of Jimmy's nicknames.

"The very last girl has been to see you. Now

you'll be asked to little parties; me, too, and Dins. I'd like a new dress."

"You don't need a new dress one bit," said Tilly severely. "Yes, you do, too," she added with an inspiration. "Then I'd get your other one."

"Somehow I think mumsy doesn't like to hear about new clothes this winter, this fall, for this winter," said Nan, dropping her voice that it might not penetrate beyond Ailsa. "I suppose it's because the family gets more expensive as it grows older. Mumsy gets us all that she can—more! I'd like a new dress, but I won't say so. My dresses are good enough, only I've worn my two best ones rather often, too."

"Take one of mine. Nobody has seen them here, and I don't need as many as mother got for me to bring here," cried Ailsa.

"You duck! But I guess I wouldn't take yours! Besides," Nan hurried on as Ailsa tried to speak, "what could I do with your skirt? Wear it as a ruffle?" She put an arm out level across little Ailsa's shoulder to point her question; Ailsa just came under it.

"I think that I could properly give my niece a dress," said Ailsa. "And maybe I'll grow taller."

"That wouldn't make the skirts you have now any longer," said Tilly, frowning in an effort to find sense in Ailsa's suggestion, and the two older girls laughed.

"Tilly, I'm ashamed of you!" Ailsa rebuked her. "Wouldn't I have them longer while I

was growing? Of course I'd have the skirts I now have longer; you can't grow in a minute."

Jimmy exploded with a joyous whoop. "Alice did, in Wonderland," he cried. "Less'n a minute! And you talk just her kind of nonsense. Tilly can't ever see fun 'less it's hollerin' at her."

"Nan, we're going to have a great time this winter, kind of an old-fashioned, real good time, not the kind the girls at home have, formal parties and all that," declared Ailsa. "I want to get up some clubs."

"The musical one?" asked Nan, wide-eyed. "That can't be more than ourselves and Ham and Giddy. I wish Mona could belong, but she doesn't do anything musical."

"That one," nodded Ailsa. "But that's as good as formed now. I want—what do you think? A dramatic club! Would Molly-Mary mind?"

"To act?" cried Nan and Tilly and Jimmy at once. "No, of course mumsy wouldn't mind!"

"Why should she?" Nan went on. "But who could act?"

"All of us!" Ailsa declared. "More or less, and something or other. I should think we could take in Mona and Kit, and maybe a boy more, and not need anyone else. It's better to keep these things small. And Tilly and Jimmy could take parts, if we needed them."

Tilly jumped up and whirled around, waving her long arms wildly.

"If we needed the parts you mean," she cried.

"If there's anything on this earth I want to do it is act, and I'm pretty sure I could do it."

"We'd give a Dutch play and you could be a windmill; you look like one when you spin around, waving your arms like that," laughed Nan.

"I think we ought to pick out a charity to help, and give a play for it. That's the way society people do. You couldn't ask people to come to see us act, especially to buy tickets for it, but you could ask them to help a charity," announced Ailsa.

"I don't believe there is a charity that needs help, not in Renwyck," said Nan. "There aren't many poor people. Almost everybody has work and earns enough to get along; those who don't, won't, and every church here has a few of what Doctor Delamater calls 'chronics' to take care of, besides doing the charity work, like hospitals and such things."

"Then we'll start a charity and give a play for its first funds!" laughed Ailsa.

"We'll find an excuse! I haven't heard mother's committees for nothing all my days. Mona and Kit are coming with the boys to-night, aren't they?"

"To found the Musical Club?" nodded Nan. "The girls are coming to see it is properly begun; that will be their part."

"If ever I act," said Jimmy suddenly, with his customary unexpectedness after the subject was abandoned, "I want to play a coon, put on

burnt cork, and do a clog dance. I know a beaut!"

"Well, of all things!" cried Ailsa. "I would have made you a clergyman!"

"Or else in Highland costume; a fling, you know," Jimmy finished his announcement, disregarding the interruption; Ailsa had thought he had finished speaking.

"Is there anybody at leisure to make mayonnaise for dinner? Amanda can't and I am so hurried I'm flurried!" Mrs. Brett's face, flushed and surrounded by more than ordinarily ruffled rings of curls, was thrust through the door to ask the question.

"O, dearest mumsy! I forgot all about you and that you had so much to do this afternoon!" cried Nan, self-reproach in her voice. "I'll make the mayonnaise."

"Molly-Mary, I'd be glad to make it, but I haven't an idea how it's done. I'll watch Nan for next time," said Ailsa. "You look tired, dear Dearness! Now I've met all the girls, I'm going to be useful. Talking about organizing, Nan; let's make our first charity foundation the Molly-Mary Rescue League, and help this honeycomb."

"I always helped her—a little," said Nan, half resenting this suggestion.

"But I never did; never knew her, and I don't know how to do much. I'm going to be a good-for-something," declared Ailsa, and she jumped up to give her sister one of her pretty, quick caresses, which were so endearing.

That night the four young people appeared early, Ham with his cornet and an embarrassed smile; Gid with his concertina and a board grin, because it was a humorous instrument. Mona and Kit brought nothing but sympathy for the enterprise and a boundless admiration.

"We're going to represent the public," said Kit. "We're going to criticize, so when you give a concert you'll be used to it."

"I think this club should have a name the first thing," said Nan.

"Same here," agreed Dins. "I was thinking to 'The Toots and Scoots;" we'd toot and whoever heard us would scoot. See?"

"The Charm Club—'music hath charms to soothe the savage breast,' you know," murmured Mrs. Brett, rather to herself, to try the suggestion, than to make it.

"Rude to the audience, mamma," said Mr. Brett. "You can't frankly tell it that it has a savage breast. I would suggest 'The Trying Club,' implies you'll do the best you can and that those who hear you will find your best not too good."

"Daddybrett, you are quite outrageous!" cried Nan. "Besides, you needn't say 'you,' in that separate way; you've got to flute with us."

"Fancy how ridiculous I'd look with you youngsters!" remonstrated Mr. Brett. "Of course I'm looking forward to that concert Ailsa talks about."

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Brett, you're right in it

with us," cried Ham, so sincerely that Mr. Brett looked pleased and his wife beamed upon him admiringly. "Call it the Hit-or-Miss Club," she advised. "That's as accurate as any musical title."

"More so," Ailsa decided. "That's all right, Molly-Mary dear. Now Hits and Misses get out your instruments while I get the music. Nan, Dins and I decided to practice 'I Would That My Love,' Mendelssohn. My brother and Dins will play the soprano and alto on the flute and violin. Ham must make a tenor for his cornet——"

"What is the concertina to do?" demanded Giddy.

"Sort of flourish around with me, accompanying," said Ailsa. "And Jimmy is to tootle in and out on his ocarina. Oh, we'll find out when we begin. We took 'I Would That My Love' because you can't help hearing the harmonies in it."

"Well, I hope you can't; I'd bet you couldn't help hearing the discords," said Ham. "It's dollars to doughnuts everybody'll wish that our 'love could silently flow in a single word' before we get through!"

"Where's your flute, Gus? demanded Ailsa.

"O, I don't want to!" whimpered Mr. Brett, pretending to be frightened, his finger in his mouth.

"Augustus! This instant, sir!" ordered Ailsa sternly, reaching up to take her big brother by the ears and bump his head against the door as

hard as the portiere allowed. After which the orchestra got to work with such fearful and wonderful results at first that Mrs. Brett, Mona, Kit and Tilly were weak with laughter and the players themselves had to stop.

"Oh, Machias, Maine!" groaned Dins. "Too much of my nickname about that! It's as bad as the Calthumpian band. Let's try something less classic—Marching Through G-a., Georgia, or There's a Girl in Havana—any old geographical thing like that."

"Yes. Let's play something we all know till we catch on to one another's style, so to speak," said Giddy. "A Mendelssoon duet is all right, Ailsa, but when seven are sawing it all ways at once it's not exactly a duet; it's a case for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to get after."

"You can work up to fine music later, if you make the Club a success, but, to be honest, it doesn't seem to suit the ocarina and the concertina—pardon me, Giddy and Jimmy!" said Mrs. Brett, sinking back in her chair quite worn out with mirth.

"All right," said Ailsa, yielding with a smile that cleared away the gloom which had gathered on her brow. "I know plenty of trash, if that's all. Let's play 'all the popular airs of the day!' There's a book of them somewhere around. Oh, do look at Peggy!" she added when she stooped to search for the highly colored 'Album' of rag time and other lively airs which she sought. The little dog had come into the room and was sitting under the piano, erect and begging with

her short little forepaws crossed, waving wildly. She ran to Ailsa and licked her face with a swift thrust of her soft tongue before the girl could dodge it.

"When Peggy begs us to stop it's time for a change of programme," Ailsa laughed. "You hold the pup, Nan." She deposited Peggy in Nan's lap, and opened the vivid book on the piano rack. "Come on again, Hits and Misses. Anybody play any part he likes; I'll accompany and we'll try to hit it—the first time was the 'miss' part of our name."

"And put lots of ginger into it; there's no good in lively things played with resignation," cried Mr. Brett, as boyish as his boys were, now he was under way.

"Nan, give Peg to mums and come here and count. Somebody's got to count aloud, or we'll all be in a different bar before we get half way through," added Dins.

"It sounded as though we had been in a great many different bars, before," remarked Giddy playing an interlude on his concertina with approved rockings of the body, true minstrel style.

" 'Fiddle up, fiddle up; get your violin," sang Mona, who did not altogether enjoy her exclusion from the concert.

So the Hit-or-Miss Club went at the gay music with renewed vigor and this time they made good on the first word of their name.

"That's a hit all right, all right!" cried Jimmy,

blissful, but purple from his mad blowing into his ocarina.

"Dat sho' is fine!" approved Amanda, coming in with a laden tray. "I was listening to you f'om de kitchen till it drawed me into de hall yondah. I couldn't hardly git de tray loaded. I put de stove lifter on my first napkin on de tray an' it lef' a smooch so't I had ter begin ovah. I didn't know it f'om a spoon, ac'chully, dat chune was so 'moralizin'. You sut'nly plays like a theatre register. You make my ole feet hop 'round, spite of de mis'ry, an' dey huhts me pow'ful bad, for a fac'."

"Oh, Amanda, please dance a hoe-down with Jimmy, PLEASE, cried Nan. "Mother and Dins will play for you! Please! Ailsa never saw you."

"Now, Nan, you go 'long! Hain't I jes' tole you what pain I got? How come you ask me dance like dat? But Jimmy sut'nly does cut pigeon wings like I 'most never seen'em," said Amanda, plainly enjoying Nan's request.

Nan glanced at her mother. Mrs. Brett took Ailsa's place at the piano, Dins raised his violin and they began to play with such reckless jollity that Amanda's bulk rocked before Jimmy ran out and faced her, with a deep bow, in the middle of the floor. They then danced! And how they danced. The small boy amazed Ailsa, who had regarded Jimmy as the one quiet Brett, but he danced this "hoe-down" like a sprite. Yet he could not surpass Amanda. She danced in every atom of her big body, gracefully, rhythmic-

ally, with humor and bubbling fun, rolling her eyes, her hands on her hips, the picture of the old Southern darkey, the embodiment of a merry-making in "the quarters" after the day was over and play time followed work. Breathless, at last Amanda stopped, and Jimmy ended the performance by standing on his head for a moment, saluting Amanda with wavings of his slender legs. The Hit-or-Miss Club applauded frantically, Peggy rushed around barking wildly, yet with an eye on the tray and her mind divided between the excitement of seeing Jimmy reversed and the hope of "cakie."

"Thank you, Amanda dear!" cried Nan. "There's nobody can dance that like you and Jimmie. I'm ever so much obliged, Amanda, and sorry you're out of breath."

Amanda's eyes rolled frightfully, but she beamed with childlike satisfaction in her talent.

"My mammy taught me," she managed to gasp. "An' she an' her ole mammy 'fore her was de renowningest dancers in dem parts. It's de genwine ole plantation way, Miss Ailsa, an' I showed Jimmie de how of it. You done seen de genwine ole style. If you wants more lem'nade, Miss Nan, honey, it's jes' out yondah waitin—in de lemons!"

With which Amanda departed in high glee, laughing inwardly and greatly pleased with herself and her world.

The musicians resumed their playing as soon as the crumbs allowed the cornetist and ocarina player to blow with safety. Mr. Brett retired,

but they soon had him up again by main force and his excellent flute playing, with Din's fair skill on the violin and Ailsa's remarkable talents, made up for Ham's erratic cornet and Jimmy's fitful ocarina; Giddy's concertina had been withdrawn from the fray, its owner's arms having given out.

"Well, we're a musical club safe and sound," cried Ailsa at last, spinning around, warm and weary after the final measure. "Now, who'll join a Dramatic Club? Will you, Kit and Mona?"

"Oh, Ailsa, do you mean to act?" cried Mona with fervor.

"Dramatic clubs don't usually sew patchwork!" laughed Ailsa. "I mean to act, Mona—plays! And to give them for charity this winter. My brother and sister said we might. Will you join?"

"We said you might organize the club, and decide on giving the play later," Mrs. Brett reminded her. Mona and Kitty did not hear the correction; they were too deeply stirred.

"It's the one thing I've wanted to do ever since I can remember," said Mona solemnly.

"I'd love to join the club and act, if I can act," said Kitty, equally, though less solemnly, moved. "I want a part where I wear a snippy, frilly apron."

"Write a part around an apron, Ailsa," advised Mr. Brett, enjoying the conversation from his couch.

"Boys, are you in this, too?" asked Ailsa briefly.

"Yes, m'am. "We'll go into anything you get up," replied Ham and Giddy in duet.

"But I won't play Hamlet, not my first season," Ham added.

"Then we'll have a dramatic club, besides!" cried Ailsa. "We'll meet Friday and discuss a play and begin to rehearse right away. I thought we'd call this the Rachel Club?"

"Renwyck will pronounce it Rachel instead of Rah-shel, and say you're mourning for your children, maybe," said Dins. "But it's a decent enough name; I'm only trying to be clever, Auntie Ailie."

"What a genius for organizing Ailsa is!" sighed Mona, admiringly.

"Hand-organizing! That's a veiled reference to the musical club," laughed Dins, but he regarded Ailsa with proud affection.

Chapter VI

ENTHUSIASMS

Ailsa made a great difference in the Brett household. The curious fact was that she whom the younger Bretts had dreaded as likely to curtail their liveliness actually was, as Dins said, "like a whole box of yeast cakes in the house."

"Your motto, Auntie, ought to be: Never nothing doing!" Dins told Ailsa. "That's where two negatives equal a positive. There's never NOTHING where you are; always something."

"That's what I like," replied Ailsa. "Did you say you were going to give a party for me, Molly-Mary?"

"That seems to be plainly my duty," laughed Mrs. Brett. "You and Nan, with Dins as good measure, are getting invitations so often that I must let you return them in some form of hospitality. Don't you think it may as well be a party?"

"I'll tell you what I think," said Ailsa, leaving her chair to go and perch on the arm of her sister's chair. "I've been thinking what would be nice." She did not say so, but she had in mind Nan's unspoken desire for a new gown and the way to dodge the need of one. "Thanksgiving will be Nan's birthday, this year. Let's have a grateful party!"

"What's that?" demanded Tilly.

"A faggot party—the gratefull, you know?" suggested Dins.

"A Grateful Pumpkin Party," amended Ailsa.

"Never have I heard of such a thing!" cried Nan, while Mrs. Brett raised her eyebrows with a whimsical look of puzzled inquiry.

"Of course you never have! I thought of it myself. It's a little invention of my own, like the White Knight's way to get off a horse," cried Ailsa triumphantly. "Everybody is to wear a long yellow cambric slip, with a cap of the same and a stiff green thing, like a stem, standing up on the top—a pumpkin, you see! And be masked, that is for the first part of the evening. And each one must be numbered and each must carry something to represent what he or she is most grateful for during the past year. And we are all to guess what the thing represented is, and then guess who it is that carries it. Of course I won't know enough about the people to guess, but it will be no end of fun for the crowd that belongs together. I know what I shall carry! Don't you think that would be a jolly party? Prizes for the best representation of the thing for which they are grateful and prizes for those who guess most of the articles, and then to those who guess most of the people who have them. We'll give each guest a number and a tablet and pencil and they must all write their guesses against the number of the person carrying the article. I'm so proud of that game I nearly burst out of my room early this morning to wake everybody up to hear about it; I woke

up at five and thought it out. I believe my yellow room inspired the yellow pumpkin dominos!"

"Peggy and Middy could come to a pumpkin party; Peggy's yellow and pumpkin shaped, and Middy's the yellowest kitten I ever saw," said Gussie, looking up from her efforts to teach Middy to sit on Peggy's back, an attempt the small dog feared, in spite of the cloth protecting her from the kitten's frantic clawing.

"But somebody might guess who they were if they came in their yellow costumes, blue would be a better disguise. I wouldn't put Middy on Peggy's back, Gussie baby, since they both dislike it. That sounds like a particularly nice party, Ailsa," said Mrs. Brett. "The dancing after unmasking should be country dances, to carry out the pumpkin idea, and the refreshments, should be something appropriate to Thanksgiving. Let us see! Turkey sandwiches, nuts, raisins, and —I have it! Tiny individual pumpkin and mince pies, baked in patty-pans! They would be a great deal of work, but we could stretch a point, especially as it is a celebration of Nan's fifteenth birthday, as well as a Grateful Party."

"Molly-Mary, you are the most perfectest, the mostest perfectest mother-woman in all this world!" cried Ailsa. "You never balk at anything, and you take up every suggestion one of us bothersomes make and improve on it! Yet the only thing in it for you is our adoration!"

"That would be enough to satisfy any un-

reasonable woman!" laughed Mrs. Brett.

"Nan, where are you? What do you say to this proposed birthday party?"

"I'm stunned," cried Nan. "It will be a fine party! Is it decided upon?"

"Certainly it is. The proposal was a decision. None named it but to praise," Dins reminded her. "Let me come in on making out the lists of guests. We ought to make it something worth while, not stick to our own little gang."

Mrs. Brett looked up quickly, Nan ostentatiously sniffed the air. "I smell a mice!" she declared.

"Well, what's the matter with the Browers? Of course Nan smelled a mice: I did have them in mind. They're more fun than anyone I know," said Dins with heightened color. Ailsa pricked up her ears at this name, new to her.

"Dear Dins," said Mrs. Brett gently, "we've discussed the Brower girls before. I do not know that there's anything actually the matter with them, but they are not quite our sort. Our girls and boys are simple girls and boys; their fun is gay, but never out of key with their youth. The Browers affect fast ways. I've no desire to say those girls are not unjust to themselves in appearing as they do; I hope it is merely bad taste. But it is such very bad taste that I distinctly object to them as comrades for you and Nan."

Ailsa looked wonderingly at her sister; it was the first time she had heard this note of grave authority in her voice.

"I really don't care about them, Dins," said Nan. "They do entertain me, I'll admit that. They know every new song on Broadway as soon as it gets to New York, and they're full of the funniest tricks and stories. But when I think them over afterward—I'm glad Mona and Kit aren't like that."

"Well, sir," said Dins defiantly, "I like them and I want to ask them, if we have a party big enough to get in some outside our crowd. I'd like to know what harm there is in being lively? You don't have to do everything they do. You couldn't, anyhow, and I'm willing to say I wouldn't care so much to see you trying. It is not your style," he added hastily, as his mother smiled. "But the Browers treat a chap right; they're awfully nice to us boys, though they know an older crowd. All the other girls together don't get as much notice from the older chaps as the Brower girls do, yet they never snub my crowd. I want to ask them, mums, if the party is big enough. They've been decent to me lots of times."

Mrs. Brett looked thoughtfully at handsome Dins, understanding in her heart that the gay girls in question would be likely to be "decent" to the lad, and thinking, as she often thought, how hard it was to deal wisely with a boy in his seventeenth year. She did not want to make the mistake of letting him feel that she was "hard on" these girls, from whom she longed to shield him, and thus to lead him to set himself up as their champion, though only in thought.

"Well, dear lad," she said after a moment, "if it adds to your pleasure you shall—or Nan shall—ask the Brower girls. But I much prefer the type of girl which the fragrant old word 'maidenly' suits. You will, too, when you've seen enough of life to realize its value."

"I'll bet you'll like them, Ailsa; they're good and lively, always doing something—like you," said Dins, somewhat embarrassed by his easy victory.

"They're no more like Ailsa than—than—than a jumping jack's like mercury!" cried Nan, and they all laughed.

"The party being decided upon, I want to decide something else, Molly-Mary," said Ailsa, not attempting to discuss the girls whom she had not seen, but considerably interested in this introduction of their names. "I want a regular treaty drawn up, a—what would you call it? A declaration of rights. I want certain duties to do every single day, so you won't have so much and can count on me. Now will you appoint me to some office in this household? The girls say I organize. We've got the musical, the Hit-or-Miss Club started, and we're going to get right at rehearsing for the play, soon as we find the play, that is! Now, I want to organize a relief corps to help you with all you have to do —the Molly-Mary Relief Corps."

"Sounds almost too much like that old Molly Maguire horror which terrorized a part of Pennsylvania forty years ago," Mrs. Brett said. "But we won't bother about the name, since

Shakespeare has said names do not matter—though we know they do! Very well, Ailsa; we'll draw up our articles of federation this instant-minute! I've no sort of idea what appointment to give you, but you, Nan and I can solve the problem. Pull your chairs up to the table, pass me that pad and pencil, please, Gussette dearie. Now then, we'll do our best to distribute offices in the Brett republic."

"Then you aren't going to make out the list of people to ask to the party?" said Dins, lingering in the doorway.

"Not just now. You think over the suggestions you will make and we'll do that after dinner," said his mother, smiling at him, a trifle wistfully.

"Back later then. By-by, mumsy." Something in his mother's eyes drew Dins back, and he retraced his steps to kiss her heartily on her warm cheek. She returned the boy's resonant smack with a hard kiss on her part, wondering, as she often had of late, how long she could keep him her boy.

The council, augmented by Tilly, hanging in absorbed interest over the edge of the table, and Gussie, releasing Peggy and Middy to sit on the arm of her mother's chair, at last decided, after discussions and rejections of plans, where in the household economy Ailsa would be most useful.

The care of her own room was an obvious beginning, but not nearly enough to satisfy Ailsa's ambition. Nan relinquished the dining room to her, seeing that it appealed to Ailsa's

taste, taking the care of Din's room instead, keeping her task of daily setting the drawing room in order. Ailsa assumed Timmy's room. Tilly scornfully rejected offer of help with her own room.

"I guess when I'm ten years old I can keep Gussie's and my room picked up, if I want to," she said. "I used to hate being orderly, but last year I found out you had a worse time in the end if you didn't pick up, so now I do."

"Tilly is a scamp, but she's a philosopher beneath it all," laughed her mother. "Now, Ailsa, do you feel better that you have everything planned and all but a time table made out? Because I see Mona coming this way, and that means no more solemn consultation just now."

"I feel much better, Molly-Mary," said Ailsa, with one of her swift kisses. "And I mean to be faithful every day. It will do me tons of good; I don't know much about sensible things. Hello, Mona!"

Mona came in, fresh and pretty, with her cheeks pink from the tingling November wind. Nan noticed—she had noticed it before, though trying not to—that Mona looked first at Ailsa when she entered, and at her second. There was no doubt that Mona admired Ailsa greatly. Well, and so did Nan! Nan told herself that she loved them both so devotedly, though so differently, that there never was anything so fortunate as that they began to care for each other. Being delighted with this happy state of things, it stood to reason that the slight sense of depres-

sion, of almost a physical pain, that seemed to come over Nan when Mona's eager eyes sought Ailsa first, was wholly imaginary.

"Oh, Ailsa, did you find a play?" cried Mona. She checked herself in an intention to cross the room to Ailsa and turned to Nan. "Hello, Nannie-nice!" she cried and threw her arm around Nan.

Nan's face cleared. "Hello, Mona-mine!" she retorted, these being the two pet names they had devised for each other. They seemed to prove that Mona would always love Nan best.

"No, I—we haven't found a play," said Ailsa. "We haven't looked for one. Nan and Dins and I talked it over last night, but we didn't know of any. We ought not to try anything too hard."

"Kit writes," observed Mona suggestively. "She makes up fine stories; Nan knows."

"Could she write a play, do you mean that?" asked Ailsa.

"I thought you and she could, maybe," said Mona. "I know you could do anything. You could take some plot you liked, out of an old play or a book, and fit the characters into it. Then they'd all be exactly what the actors wanted to play, because you'd put in what each one wanted. Kit and I were talking about it to Ham and Gid, and we're all as set as fate about what we'll do and what we won't do—the '*won't*' do is the worst of it! I believe the only way you can make it go is to write a play for us.

Kit said she'd try, if you would—we'd all help, advise, you know."

Mrs. Brett joined in Nan and Ailsa's laugh; Mona laughed with them, but she looked anxious. "I suppose you think that would be easy!" Ailsa cried. "I can see us getting mad and disgusted! It would be like fishing characters out of a rag-bag and letting everyone cut and snip the pieces. They'd all have to come and try on their characters and they wouldn't fit. How we'd have to take in here, and let out there, sew a ruffle on this shirt, and cut a piece off that coat, and in the end nobody would think what they got was becoming to them! Yet it would be rather interesting, and it would look great on the programmes to say: This play is the joint work of the Gifted Young Actresses, Miss Flanders and Miss Ailsa Brett!" Ailsa half relented as the appeal to her ambition developed in her mind.

"Will you try? Will you?" cried Mona, seeing this.

"That's got to be thought over," said Ailsa wisely, but Nan knew by the far-off look in her eyes that the idea was taking root in Ailsa; she felt herself measured for a part on the spot.

"You could write a splendid play, Ailsa," Nan began, but Tilly interrupted.

"If you do write a play and don't write a part for me—and Jim—I'll never forgive you," she cried. "It's as easy as nothing at all to stick us all in, if you're making up a play, and I want to act."

"I promise, Tilly-Pilly," cried Ailsa. "Mona, we're to have a Thanksgiving party, Nan and I. Everybody is to come as a pumpkin. We've got to attend to that first of all."

"To their coming as a pumpkin? What do you mean by that, anyway?" cried Mona.

Ailsa and Nan explained in unison and antiphonally, rapidly, with many gestures.

"Come around to-night and help us make out our list," Nan ended, when all had been told.

"What a scrumptious party!" cried Mona. "Who thought of it? Ailsa, I'm sure. Yes, I'll come. We can talk play, too."

"Ailsa thought of it," said Nan. "It's to celebrate my birthday, you see."

"Oh, that's so! Thanksgiving is on your birthday this year. Ailsa, you're the greatest, the very greatest for a little thing I ever saw!" Mona declared. "No wonder Kit and I said you could write a play! You're on the jump every minute, your brains, are."

"I don't want brains like a hop toad," said Ailsa. "Stop throwing bouquets at me, Mona Chapman! I'll get so conceited nobody can stand me. My blessed yellow room told me about the pumpkin party, I think. Mercy, I haven't been upstairs since breakfast to put it in order! Here's another scheme, Mona! Nan and I are going to have regular domestic duties, daily ones. Nan always did have, but I'm no more good about a house than a feather would be—and I hope to be as good as a feather duster!" Ailsa laughed at herself. "I want to

learn to help my Molly-Mary. She's gone: I never noticed she had left the room, did you, Nan? Come up stairs, both of you. Nan and I must begin to keep our pledge; we've drawn up a regular time-table of morning tasks."

Ailsa jumped up and ran off, followed by Nan and Mona. "Isn't it lovely to see Ailsa, so pretty, so clever, so AWFULLY clever, caring about plain things this way?" Mona whispered to Nan.

"Ailsa's a perfect trump," Nan said. "I love her dearly. It's because she is clever that she sees it's good to know how to do things at home, and to help mumsy."

Nan went on to her own room, but Mona paused at Ailsa's open door. It was easy to see that Ailsa fascinated her, that Nan was, at least while the novelty of Ailsa held, less interesting to her. Nan could not help minding it that Mona hung, charmed, around the yellow room while she shook up her pillows, uncompanioned.

"This is a dear room; I saw it when they were getting it ready for you, only we had no idea Mrs. Brett meant it for you. We had no idea you were you, in the first place! Isn't Mrs. Brett not only a peach, but a whole orchard of choice fruit?"

Mona had wandered to the dresser and was examining Ailsa's belongings.

"I think Molly-Mary, Mrs. Augustus Brett, my sister-in-law, is not only just about perfect, but she's the most lovable woman in the world," declared Ailsa. "If you're going to stay here,

Mona, I wish you'd go behind the bed and help the chambermaid. I hate to make two trips, one to each side of the bed, and have only one blanket on after I get through!"

Mona laughed and did as she was asked. "All the Renwyck young people love to come here," she said. "You see they treat us respectfully, have fun with us, leave us to do what we like, talk to us and listen to what we think about things, politics or anything. It isn't only Mrs. Brett; it's your brother, too, Ailsa."

"I know," agreed Ailsa. "I had no idea Gus was so nice! I mean I thought he'd be older acting, more formal. He's the nicest of my brothers, and that's the truth. You might hand me that pillow, if you will, and I'll plump it and put it on; then I'm through."

Mona complied, then drifted back to the dresser. She took up a photograph in a silver frame, the photograph of a handsome woman in evening dress, slightly leaning against a window casement, pushing back the curtain with her gloved hand.

"What a beauty, Ailsa! And what a perfectly beautiful gown? Is it some famous person?" asked Mona.

"No, not if you mean a publicly famous person; everybody isn't known to the public who ought to be. I suppose this lady will be when I've helped write that play," laughed Ailsa. "That's my mother."

"Truly? Ailsa, isn't she handsome! Isn't

she very splendid! Don't you love to have her look like that?" cried Mona.

"Yes, and I love to have that look like her, as it's her picture," laughed Ailsa. "Of course I love to have her handsome; she certainly is handsome, too. I don't see why you ought not to say your own mother's a beauty, if she is one."

"It must be like living in the house with a princess to have a mother like that," Mona went on, still gazing at the picture.

"Oh, she doesn't wear evening gowns to breakfast; she isn't always so princessfied. But she is always a beauty. She's tall, graceful; I'm not one bit like her." Ailsa was looking over Mona's shoulder by this time.

"How you must miss her! And how terribly she must miss you!" sighed Mona.

Ailsa's face changed. "My mother is busy, Mona; she does so many, many things, and she is out a great deal. I don't honestly think she minds my being away; she knows she could call me back any time. When my brothers and sisters were my age she was not able to do what she liked best. She got more than she wanted of sitting at home with children. She is rather young still and there's no one but me left, so she can do what she likes. She likes best to belong to no end of things and to go out all the time, so she does it. And I don't think she misses me in the least."

"Anyone would miss you that ever had you around," said Mona fervently, setting the picture back on the dresser. "I'd rather have the

Renwyck way of being mothers. That isn't much like Mrs. Brett, is it?"

"Not like Mrs. Augustus Brett; my mother is Mrs. Brett," said Ailsa, with a crooked little smile. "Molly-Mary wouldn't care for all the kingdoms of the earth if one of her children had a bad toothache. You see I never learned anything about home-making, but Molly-Mary is going to show me lots of things; I saw that almost at once."

"What a dear girl you are, Ailsa!" said Mona, smiling at Ailsa in the glass and swinging around to catch her by the shoulders in the flesh. "I wish you'd like me best of the girls. I wish you'd let me be your best friend in Renwyck."

"Nan?" suggested Ailsa.

"You mean next to Nan? Of course she has first place, but she is almost like your sister. Or did you mean I am Nan's best friend? But can't I be two girls' best friend?" asked Mona.

"I meant Nan would be first to me, but, as you say, she's in the family. Certainly you can be two girls' best friend! It made me think most about you in the first place, because Nan was so fond of you and talked about you so much. I shouldn't be one bit surprised if you were my best friend, too!" Ailsa's hearty tone and smile did away with the doubt conveyed by her form of expression.

Mona hugged her forcibly. "If you knew how glad I'd be!" she cried.

"I wonder what Nan's doing?" hinted Ailsa,

with sudden compunction. "She's in there alone."

"She knows I've seen her room always. I'll go after her," said Mona.

She ran across the hall. Nan was dusting and humming, her cheeks were red, her welcoming smile somewhat strained.

"Isn't Ailsa's mother handsome? Your aunt —your——. What is she?" said Mona.

"My step-grandmother. She looks younger than mumsy, but dear mumsy never is gowned like that," said Nan. "Sit there, Mona, or I'll brush you up and throw you away."

"You wouldn't throw your Mona away, Nannie-nice, not even if she did not weigh a hundred and seventeen and a quarter pounds and if you could sweep her up," said Mona wisely.

Nan's eyes brightened, she laughed. How foolish she was to mind being left alone for awhile! Naturally Mona liked to browse over a new girl's belongings, and if Mona found Ailsa irresistible, so, for that matter, did Nan.

"I'll never throw you away, no matter how much or how little you weigh, nor what you do, Mona-mine!" she cried, with her own cheery laugh.

"You're a sweet thing, Nan Brett, and nobody's sweeter!" declared Mona sincerely.

She had seen Nan's cloud and appreciated the speed with which it rolled away at a kindly touch from the hand that Nan loved best.

Nan shook her head. "That isn't true, but

I like to have you think it is, Mona," she said.

"I guess I've known you long enough to know!" said Mona. "When you and Ailsa get through your tasks you're coming down town with me to get ice cream. Hurry up! It's all very well for you, who aren't in school this year, but I can't lose all my Saturday forenoon waiting for you to get through being good."

"We don't mean to get through being good, Mona," laughed Nan, entirely her radiant self now. "Ailsa is so enthusiastic about helping mumsy! She's one bunch of enthusiasm about all sorts of things. It's like being a little dummy car attached to an electric engine to keep up with her."

"That's what makes her so perfectly fascinating, that and her pretty, changeable face and her ways, her voice——"

"Her Ailsa Brettishness," Nan interrupted Mona. "You needn't praise her to her niece, Mona! I can't admire her any more than I do, unless I grow ten times taller and broader to have room for it."

"Speaking of enthusiasm!" said Mona suggestively.

Chapter VII

"some pumpkins"

"Twenty-five people are as many as we can make perfectly comfortable; thirty as many as can get on well; thirty-five is our limit; how many shall we ask?" said Mrs. Brett looking up from her pad with a smile. She had written: "To Invite," at the head of her page, "Grateful Party" below that, and had drawn an inclosing border of pumpkins down both sides of the white sheet.

Gathered around the table with her were all the children, Ailsa, Mona and Kit, Ham and Gid, all eager to suggest and to amend other people's suggestions, for the Grateful Party, in pumpkin costumes, with which Thanksgiving Day and Nan's birthday were to be celebrated together. As usual in the evening, Mr. Brett lounged with his pipe and a book, reading a little, smoking a little, enjoying and entering into whatever was going on a great deal.

"Invite forty," said Dins promptly. "We can always give a good time to ten more than can get on well, and five more than our limit."

"We want a pumpkin party, not a squash one, Dins," said Nan, and was applauded on the instant.

"I say ask no more than thirty-five; our Brett children, including Mr. Augustus Brett and

Mary, his wife, bring it up to forty-three, and I'm afraid with that we shall have to train some of the pumpkins on the wall," Nan went on.

"Not a bit of it! Besides, some of the invited will be Thanksgiving-dining off somewhere, probably, so won't come," said Gid. "This house always has room enough."

"The one thing I ask—and I'd say command if it sounded nice and gentle—is that you won't say anything in the invitation about it's being my birthday! I don't want people to think they must bring me a gift, especially those we don't know well enough for them to know it's my birthday without being told," said Nan earnestly.

"No fear of that, if I've a hand in the invitations, Nannie," Mrs. Brett said. "We'll know that we are especially grateful on Thanksgiving Day this year because the date of your birth falls on it, but we won't seem to levy tribute to you."

"It is to be thirty-five, then?" asked Ailsa, anxious to bring the discussion back to the important consideration.

"Yes, all right," Dins yielded the point. "We'll call them off, and mumsy shall set them down."

The names rattled thick and fast for three minutes, so fast that Mrs. Brett could not keep up with the suggestions. It is always easy to begin to select guests, especially in a town as small as Renwyck, where there are sure to be certain ones invariably included in one another's

good times. After this rapid start suggestions dropped slowly from one and then another; these were the names of the girls and boys partly desired, partly not, from whom choice to make up the number was less easy.

"We were going to ask the Brower girls; there are four of them," said Dins, who had been waiting for someone else to remember this.

Nan had remembered it, but she hoped that Dins had decided to forget that his mother had reluctantly consented to these girls, for whom she did not care, being invited.

Ham and Gid looked up quickly. "Are they to be asked?" cried Ham. "That's good; they'd wake up any party."

"They're not Nan's sort," said Gid, who considered gentle Nan the prettiest and sweetest of girls.

"They're all right," said Dins. "Please, mums, write next Bessie, Irma, Reine and Billie Brower."

"The youngest one is really named Cora, isn't she? She is a year younger than Nan. The oldest one must be a great deal older than you children," Mrs. Brett permitted herself to say as she set down the sisters' names, according to her promise.

"That's why it's so awfully nice of them to be willing to go to a younger set's party and to be so nice to we juniors. The Bower girls—Bessie must be about twenty and she never snubs boys of our age. They don't seem a minute older than Nan, not even Bess and Irma," said Dins,

ready to champion these girls against his mother's unspoken prejudice.

Mr. Brett unexpectedly laid down his book and took his pipe from his lips.

"If you are asking a lot of youngsters, enough to prove an invitation doesn't mean much, I don't mind your including the Brower girls, but I don't want you to strike up any real acquaintance with them," he said.

Dins looked up with a frown. "They're only cut-ups," he said.

"They're nice, jolly girls, Mr. Brett," Ham seconded him.

"There are ways and other ways of being jolly and cutting up. When you are guardians of youth, in your turn, you'll object to some girls of a second generation who are lively in the Browers' ways," said Mr. Brett tersely, resuming his pipe and book to indicate that the discussion was closed.

"Well, I don't like them; they're pleasant, but I know they're laughing at me. All they care for is to have something going on. I always feel as if they said to one another: What is that kid out alone for? They make fun of everyone and laugh at everything, and I don't think everything in the world is funny, though we Bretts are such laughers—not at everything, though!" announced Nan, with unusual decision.

"But they're to be asked, so what's the use? How many does that make, mumsy?"

"Thirty-two," said Mrs. Brett, looking up from counting her list with a smile of hearty approval

for sensible Nan. "Don't you think we'd better stop there? As Nan suggested, it will be a squash, instead of a pumpkin party!"

"All right; call it off with that," approved Dins. "You've got to write the invitations and give a hint how the costumes are to be made, or they won't all be alike. I think we ought to furnish each guest with a cut paper pattern and a water color sketch of how the costume ought to look when done, like one of these awful long, slippery, heavy women's magazines."

"I don't know a single long, slippery heavy woman, Dins!" Mr. Brett quietly remarked, out of his apparent absorption in his book. "Look out where you put your adjectives and nouns, my boy."

"We are going to make a sketch of the costume design on every invitation, and we've got to write a note explaining that each guest is to carry the best representation he-she can make of the thing he-she's had this year to be most grateful for. Mercy, doesn't English need another pronoun!" sighed Ailsa.

"I'm glad I don't have to come in on getting up those invitations!" Dins said, pushing back his chair. "If you've got to furnish designs and instructions for this party you'll have a large-sized job. I wouldn't ask anyone but Mona, Kit and these two pagans, who know all about it from the start." He slapped Ham and Gid and bade them: "Come on!" getting out the Flinch cards for a game while the feminine portion of the committee bent to the task of

framing the invitations and making the sketch of the costume, which all the guests were to wear uniformly.

It took some time to word the invitations so that their meaning was clear as to the requirements of costume and symbols and yet not make them too long. But Kit was really clever at drawing and she sketched an attractive little figure after Ailsa's description of the costume, which was to be copied in water color at the head of each invitation.

Only a few of the invitations to this curiosity inspiring party were declined; almost everyone asked was at home for Thanksgiving. Renwyck was humming with speculation as to the sort of party the Bretts would make of it, at least the younger part of Renwyck thus hummed, and was eager to accept the invitation.

Mrs. Brett and Amanda baked minature Thanksgiving pies for two days before the party and the day immediately before it everybody in the house turned into the kitchen to help prepare turkey for sandwiches and do all else that could be done the day before.

It was a lucky thing that Amanda was as patiently sweet tempered as she was, for pandemonium reigned in her kitchen. It was a large family for which to prepare a Thanksgiving dinner and this had to be done, besides all the work for the party.

"We won't have too much for dinner," Mrs. Brett said. "There must be a boundary set to

our ambition. We'll do our best at Christmas, instead."

"You can't have too much, mumsy," said Jimmy, in all seriousness, and raised a laugh.

Nan's presents from her family were around her plate at breakfast, as they always were placed on her birthday. She tried not to feel disappointed that there was none from one of her friends. Then she grew suspicious.

"You don't suppose Mona and Kit are telling the rest that it is my birthday, do you?" she cried, really troubled by the idea. "Mona and Kit haven't sent me so much as a card, and they never forget. I wonder if they are going to play a trick on me!"

"I don't believe I'd worry; it won't be a bomb, a dynamite plot whatever it is," advised Dins.

Dinner was at two that day, to allow plenty of time for the final preparations for the party. Ailsa had designed the decorations, which were mainly corn husks! But no one would have believed that they could be so pretty. Ailsa had directed her assistants, Dins, Ham, Gid, Nan, Mona, Kit, Tilly and Jimmy, and they had turned the large parlors of the rambling Brett house into a cornfield, or the suggestion of one. The corn husks were stacked against the walls and in the corners, held in place by straps of cloth that matched them, fastened by thumb tacks which did no harm to the walls. Yellow Japanese lanterns, alternated with green ones, were hung as close together as was safe to furnish the light, instead of electricity or the

gas. Full ears of golden corn were hung on the picture wires and down the window casements and a lemonade stand of pumpkins was built in a corner of the dining room, a pyramid surmounted by a giant of a pumpkin, hollowed out and the lemonade bowl fitted inside of it. This was Dins' idea and he was inordinately proud of it; it was really a triumph from every viewpoint. Ailsa had suggested that the cups to serve the lemonade from this bucolic fountain should be parafine cups, decorated with Thanksgiving emblems. She and Kit did the decorating in rapid strokes of oil paints, which would stand wetting. They were gorgeous to behold, and perfected the pumpkin drinking fountain.

Mr. Brett had engaged the Renwyck Quartette to play for dancing; two violins, a flute and the piano constituted the quartette, which always played with spirit and in perfect time. A screen of corn husks and ears of corn shut the musicians from sight.

"They may think the music is the wind blowing through the corn field, if they don't see them," suggested Nan poetically, referring to her guests and to the musicians, but not stoppiug to disentangle them in her sentence.

Tilly was to be allowed to stay up till the party was over, she and Jimmy, and they were both wild with joy over this, their first real dissipation.

There was not time to waste over a properly served supper, nor need for one after a Thanksgiving dinner, with a party supper to come, so

by seven o'clock the Bretts, young and old, drew a collective long breath, surveying the preparations with satisfaction, and repaired to their several chambers to make their pumpkin toilets; only Mr. and Mrs. Brett were to appear in their proper persons.

Two maids who had been hired to help good Amanda opened the door and attended the girl-pumpkins in the dressing room. Ailsa and the Bretts were all keeping close in order to slip in with their guests and let their identity be guessed with the rest.

The maid in the dressing room checked wraps, for when they were removed everybody was already in the pumpkin disguise and there would have been no other way of distinguishing one owner from another. Gradually the fifteen girls assembled and the same number of boys were in the other room, all similarly attired. There was to be a "March of the Pumpkins" when the music sounded from below; for this the giggling pumpkins waited on the second floor.

Mrs. Brett came up and counted; there were thirty-five "pumpkins" waiting; the thirty guests who had accepted the invitation and her own five young people were evidently all there.

She disappeared and in a moment there came the signal of several chords of music; the "pumpkins" got into line. Then the march rang out, gay, bright, enlivening, and all the "pumpkins" moved down the stairs.

It really was a sight worth seeing. Mr. and

Mrs. Brett, stationed in the drawing room doorway to receive the guests formally, were quite convulsed with laughter and saw that the success of the party surpassed their hopes. Every one of the pairs passing them with a deep bow, was dressed alike in a yellow domino, with a jack-o' lantern-like mask of white cloth, their heads surmounted with a round cap ending in an erect stalk of twisted green, for all the world like the stem of a pumpkin. Hands were all encased in yellow cotton gloves, and every pair carried the emblem of the gift its owner had received that year for which the greatest gratitude should be felt that Thanksgiving Day. So far so good; this was but carrying out the programme. But everybody held something else conspicuously mounted above the emblem and here was where the guests scored by adding to the plan of the givers of the party. For everyone in line carried a little picture of Nan!

This was Ham's secret. He had had painted enough copies of a recent small photograph that Nan had taken to supply everyone of the pumpkins. So all her guests were mutely saying to Nan that whatever else they were grateful for that year, she, whose birthday it was, counted among their best gifts. It was a pretty idea and a good joke, too, for it left the Bretts easily identified, since they alone held no picture.

When all the funny pumpkin-costumed company was in the room and continued the march amid the corn decorations, the effect was as pretty and droll as Ailsa had dreamed it. The

lanterns shed a golden light, with deep shadows where it did not penetrate, and the whole effect was like something seen in sleep.

Nan discovered that at a signal from one of the "pumpkins" each couple that passed a certain niche, where stood a statue which Ailsa had draped with a bright Roman blanket, and had given a sheaf of wheat and a great label across its breast, marked "Ceres," paused and laid a package at the goddess' feet—the "goddess," which was really Praxiteles' Faun, converted. "They've been told!" thought Nan, not a little sorry, yet naturally excited and eager to see what such a quantity of gifts would be. She could not creep up to look without betraying who she was, so she kept her place in the line. The musicians suddenly broke into a two-step that sent all the pumpkins seeking a mate and dancing at top speed.

Dance after dance followed, without a pause, till it was half past nine and Mrs. Brett knew that the "pumpkins" must be melting away behind their masks.

"Please form a line around the room. I'm to collect all the guesses as to what the emblems represent and who each pumpkin is. Then we'll unmask and have the supper, and after it prizes and dancing, with a breath of air on your poor faces!" she announced.

The pumpkins applauded and Mrs. Brett rapidly collected the papers with which each guest was provided. Every pumpkin was numbered, each paper was numbered, so that the

guesses were both recorded and identified by the number of each person. Some of the symbols of the gifts that the year had brought were easily guessed by those who knew the history of certain events. For instance, Dins carried a scroll, representing a diploma. His friends knew that he had skipped a year at school and would graduate the following June—not hard to guess what his roll symbolized, nor who carried it, for Dinsmore was elated over this prospect.

Mona carried a baby doll. Everybody knew she was "crazy over" her sister's new baby, so Mona was easily guessed.

Ailsa wore a group photograph of the Brett family, for she was most grateful that this year had made known to her this branch of her family. That was easily guessed, also. Some things were not so easy. A pen balked most guessers who did not know that its wearer had won a prize by her little story, sent to a small paper.

A sheet of music carried by one girl meant that she had been told that she had a voice and would one day sing. A ledger meant that a boy had at last won his father's consent to go straight into business when he left school, omitting college, which he despised. So it went, a bright little collection of objects announcing various causes of gratitude. Nan wore the letters "A. B." on her domino sleeve, which did not stand in this case for Bachelor of Arts, nor that she had taken a degree, but that

she was most thankful for the year's gift of Ailsa Brett just as Ailsa announced that she was most grateful for her brother's family. Tilly, who was nothing if not original, puzzled everybody by carrying a pound weight from the kitchen scale. Nobody but Nan could guess it, but she knew that Tilly had gained a pound in weight and was deeply thankful for it.

They made a kind of cotillion figure of the unmasking. The "pumpkins" danced into the center of the room and clasped left hands held high in the air, boys on the outside, girls inside of the ring, facing in opposite directions. Then the quartette played a minuet to which the great double circle moved slowly around. At the final pause and sweep of the music, right hands came up with a gesture, following a leader, and tore from each face the concealing jack-o'-lantern mask. Then, after a minute of clapping, each boy gave his arm to the girl whose left hand he held and fell into line for the supper march.

The supper was a joy to look upon, but it was a greater joy to eat.

"How I can be hungry I do not see!" cried Ailsa, "after that Thanksgiving dinner, but hungry I am. Starved!"

"Same here!" cried Giddy, piling Ailsa's plate, partly through a desire to serve her, partly to hurry to get at his own supper; he had taken Ailsa out.

"Aren't we funny?" cried Ailsa, looking

around the table with much satisfaction. For was not this party her own invention?

"It's the best ever!" cried a girl across from Ailsa.

Ailsa looked over, she did not know her, from which fact she partly identified her.

"Are you a Brower girl? I know all the others, so I think you must be a Miss Brower," Ailsa said.

"Oh, cut it out!" cried the girl with a jolly laugh. "Miss Brower! You're Ailsa Brett and I shall call you Ailsa. Nobody ever calls one of the Brower girls Miss! I'm the third one, Reine. That's Bess, the oldest—we're all one age, though!—'way at the other end. Irma, second Brower, is below you on that side. Bill, the youngest—came near being a left Brower!—is with your brother Dins, who wishes she was Bess. All the boys wish either of the others was Bess when they catch us in a shuffle like the one in the other room."

Ailsa laughed, but did not wholly like this ready freedom and such a long history across the table. But the girl, though she was not in the least pretty, had a certain sort of jolly assurance, as if she knew she would be admired, that went a long way toward achieving her end. Ailsa liked her though she did not quite approve her.

"No wonder you headed your invitations 'Some Pumpkins!'" Reine Brower went on. "It's that in both senses. Dandy party, awful pretty and chipper!" She jumped up and came around the table, carrying her plate. "Not good

manners, but everything goes!" she said. "Giddy Davis, run around there and take my place; I want to sit next Ailsa and get acquainted. We don't have to sit sandwich, boy, then girl; it isn't like a dinner party. Run along, kid. Ailsa, you're a magnet!"

Ailsa looked confused, half pleased, half displeased. Reine's manner was so hearty, so frank, so apparently unstudied, that friendly Ailsa felt ashamed to criticize it in her thoughts. She could not guess, being a single minded, genuine young girl, that the Brower girls had decided that Ailsa Brett was to be what they called "a drawing card" that winter, and that it would profit them to gain her intimacy, if they could. She was a stranger and might fancy them. If she did she would bring them good times. Young as they were the Brower girls were keen to serve their own interests. The Renwyck fathers and mothers, the people best worth knowing, did not encourage their acquaintance. Before they had come to this party the Brower girls had decided to "cultivate" Ailsa Brett. Now that they saw her so pretty, lively, attractive to boys and girls equally, they were strengthened in their purpose.

"I'm glad you like the party. It's funny, but it is pretty, too," Ailsa said. "No one could be sure just how it would turn out."

"It's the best ever!" declared Reine. "Invent a party for us to give! If only we have a cold

winter! We girls want to get up an ice carnival. Do you love out doors things?"

"Yes, of course," said Ailsa. "I love all kinds of things, in and out, that are fun."

"Right-oh!" laughed Reine Brower. "You're a good sport; I see that! I don't believe any other young people in Renwyck have the good times we do. You help us have them, and we'll share our last scrap—of fun—with you. Giddy Davis would like to share a scrap with me this minute, only it wouldn't be a scrap of fun! Isn't he ripping!" She leaned across the table. "Never mind, Gid! Be generous. You've known Ailsa all this time; let me get acquainted with her."

Mrs. Brett came up to this group, making a round of the tables to see that no one lacked anything.

"Everybody is ready to go into the other room, Ailsa," she said. "You must lead in the return march, and, Nan, and you are to distribute the prizes."

In some unexplained way the rest of the evening the Browers came to the fore. Bess Brower won the first prize in the guessing contest. Irma and Billie—Cora—Brower sang a duet from the latest light opera, with a dance between stanzas that all the boys applauded wildly and the girls, too; some of them with keen enjoyment, some of them, of whom Nan was one, wondering why she did not like it, while she sincerely applauded it. Reine danced a solo dance, and made it pretty, in spite of her yellow

domino. The pumpkin costumes, without the masks, were worn all the evening. Dins was enraptured with the doings of these lively girls and looked triumphantly at his mother, as if to remind her that their presence was his doing. Reine devoted herself to Ailsa so tactfully, she was so keenly observant of Ailsa's degrees of responsiveness, that before the party was over Ailsa yielded her something like friendship.

To crown it all the Brower girls suggested a new dance appropriate to the day, "A Turkey Chase," they called it. A solo dancer led, and all the others, dancing in pairs, followed every motion of the "turkey" and finally caught and encircled her in a rapid whirl that was to represent penning the turkey. It was great fun.

"It is time for a Virginia reel to wind up with," cried Mona. "It's late. But first we must give Nan a good send-off into her sixteenth year. Nannie, you've got a lot of birthday presents at the foot of that marble lady over there, who really is the marble faun. You can't waste time opening them to-night. But you've got to climb up on a throne and receive a compliment and a wish from every pumpkin at this party. We've fixed it up among ourselves; there's no way out for you."

Dins came up at that moment with a tall step ladder and several girls hastily tore down some of the corn decorations and fastened them on the sides of the steps. Then they all forced poor blushing Nan to the top. Seated there, one after the other of her guests came up to her,

knelt before her, paid her the most exaggerated compliment that they could invent, wished her the most ridiculous wish for impossible things, and rose to make way for the next one. Before half a dozen had gone through this absurd performance the whole room was in a gale, and most of the last compliments and wishes were drowned in shouts of laughter.

There was hardly enough breath left in anyone to dance the Virginia reel, but a Thanksgiving night party, a Grateful Party, and a birthday party, especially a party of "some Pumpkins," could not end in any other way.

They danced the Virginia reel in double lines or it would never have been finished, and at the end, in the final promenade, all the couples danced out of the room, and the "pumpkins" stumbled, warm and out of breath, up stairs, to don their wraps and go home from this queer but exceedingly merry party.

"Beats all other parties put together. I call this some party, as well as some pumpkins! You're a peach, Ailsa; good night," cried Reine Brower, in her way voicing everybody's sentiments.

CHAPTER VIII

JUST BEING GOOD

A week of the worst possible weather ushered in December.

"Wouldn't it be as correct to say we are having bad weathers, Molly-Mary?" asked Ailsa. "We can't lump all the sorts of this past week as one weather, can we? Rain with thunder and lightning on Monday," she began to enumerate on her fingers. "Sleety rain on Tuesday. Wind and a hope of clearing Wednesday, but a quick setting that mistake right with hail at night. Then a sunny day, but such wind that no one could walk. And now snow, and the weather prophet says: 'Warmer with rain Saturday.' That will probably make it muddy and then we shall have had all the bad things there are put away in the drawers of the Weather Bureau."

"Do we mind, Allie? I thought not," hinted Nan, coming laughing up to put her arm around Ailsa.

"Course we don't!" agreed Ailsa promptly. "We're having fine times, but only fine people could have them when it storms in so many ways, so many days, and it's so dark and dingy that you have to light a match to see where the sky is! We are nice and domestic and happy together."

"I like stormy days once in a while," said Mrs. Brett. "It is such a comfort to get out all the things you've been meaning to do for ages, and pitch into them without a fear of being caught by visitors when you're looking your worst, working at all these piled-up tasks. And some of the tasks get done, too!"

She pointed triumphantly to a pile of folded garments, mended and ready to wear.

"You're getting to be such a great help Ailie!" Mrs. Brett added, smiling so warmly at her guest that it was easy to see that outer sunshine mattered less to this household than to most.

"I'd like to be a help, Molly-Mary, but pretty nearly everything I knew about it I read—in Little Women, or some story. And you know when most girls read stories of that sort they never think of going and doing likewise. Queer thing, too, because if you read about knights fighting, Florence Nightingale, or something heroic, you are sure to wonder what there is splendid for you to do! And yet I enjoy a real home story best of all. I'd be ready to run up a flag pole and fly myself as a banner to the breeze if I thought I was any use to you—you dear woman! Weren't we to mend china to-day?" asked Ailsa, her cheeks glowing from her sister-in-law's word of praise.

"Sure enough! I'm in that," said Tilly, starting up from her prostrate position, face down on the couch, where she was immersed in a book. Tilly read, as she did everything

else, violently, by fits and starts. "I just love to mend china."

"Clear the table, then, and help get the broken things together," said Nan.

"I thought you didn't get the broken things together till you mended them," said Jimmy.

"Clever boy! Bring them here and put them together on the cleared table, then!" cried Nan. "How hard it is to have to make everything perfectly clear to your baby brother!"

Jimmy threw a pillow at her, ruthlessly jerking it out from under Tilly's elbows. "Baby yourself!" he said, by way of retort. Then he and Tilly fell upon the table and cleared it by the simple expedient of sweeping all the magazines and papers on the floor, depositing all else on chairs. His mother made no comment upon this method, knowing that, after the task before them was done, she and the girls would have to set the room straight, in any case.

"Get half a dozen old newspapers, Jimsy, to cover the table," directed Mrs. Brett. "And Tilly, if you won't knock down every other bottle in the medicine closet, you may go up and fetch the new bottle of cement I recently brought home. We'll begin getting out the china that has been collecting, waiting mending for some time, Ailsa and Nan. You'll think there surely has been a revolution in China when you see it! It will look like a Reign of Terror. I have been trying for I don't know how long to steal a day to mend all the broken pieces in this house.

Nan and Ailsa followed Mrs. Brett to help her "fetch and carry," Nan said.

"I never could see through the fetching and carrying idea," said Ailsa. "Which is which?

"It's easy enough to see now," said Nan. "Mumsy will fetch the things out and we'll carry them into the other room."

There were a good many articles, all told, which Mrs. Brett handed out from the cupboard for her lieutenants to carry into the hospital and set on the table, where they were to be operated upon. There was an elephant from Dins' room, its back hollowed for matches, and this animal was minus a hind leg, now to be restored. There was a delightful squat Toby jug, valuable, too, that waited its handle. A loving cup of Old English pottery was in like plight. Middy, who was as lively as four months of living makes a kitten—and much more yellow than anything that is not an orange!—had climbed over a washstand in Tilly's room, when Gussie was chasing him, the linen cover had slipped and Middy had come down under a shower of pieces of toilet set which frightened him almost into fragments himself, and which broke the cover of the soap dish, the handle of the small ewer, a piece out of the mug—the unlucky set was in fragments! The big ewer and the bowl had paused in their flight on the edge of the stand, arrested by their weight, so Mrs. Brett had saved the smaller pieces to mend when the time came. Gussie had a doll whose charms were invisible to all but her and whose

broken bisque hands she had long been imploring her mother to repair. Nan's beloved slender green glass vase, used as a hatpin holder, was suffering; it had lost a triangular piece out of its side which could be restored without showing the crack, if it was turned around on the dresser and a hatpin made to lie against the line of cement. There was quite a congregation of china and glass cripples by the time the girls had carried into the library and set on the table all of the varied articles that Mrs. Brett handed down to them from her station on the low steps kept in the china closet to stand on to reach the shelves. Last of all, Mrs. Brett took down a platter of pink glazed china, broken exactly across the centre, at which Ailsa exclaimed:

"Oh, that old-time platter! It's just like a sugar bowl and teapot and a cup and saucer that mother has!"

"Has she any of it?" asked Mrs. Brett. "It was your great-grandfather's. Augustus has almost the complete set. His sister, who died in Australia, had a little of the set, and her share was shipped here to us. I have often wondered whether the rest of the tea service was broken; we have eleven cups and saucers, a hot water pot and cream jug. Your mother's three pieces would complete it. It was a full dinner and tea service. It is packed away. I mean to buy a glass closet for this old china alone; I am very fond of the queer old set. It is waiting to be honorably and safely bestowed. We were disconsolate enough when this platter fell—from

my own hands at that! I am going to have it rivetted; we'll leave it out to-day."

Mrs. Brett had talked on rather disjointedly, reaching up and scanning the shelf to make sure that there were no more broken pieces of china overlooked.

Ailsa held the two parts of the old platter, meanwhile looking at them closely but not seeing them. Her thoughts were away on what she knew of this old china, on what its accidental discovery would mean. A divided duty was all she saw just then. She aroused herself, postponing thinking it out till better time and place offered. With all her liveliness and love of fun Ailsa had been so much left to herself that when it came to judgment, forming opinions, she was both just and cautious; she did not jump at conclusions.

"Let Nan and me mend, Molly-Mary dear," Ailsa said, as Mrs. Brett dismounted and came out of the closet, breathless and with her hair "flustered," as Gussie expressed it. "We can do it and you can get at something else."

"Oh, no, indeed! I shall enjoy sitting down to this work. You two must help press and hold bits in place till they stick. I'll tell you about the pink lustre china while we work," said Mrs. Brett. "Anything the matter with my baby?"

"Yes, there is," said Gussie decidedly. "A foot ball; I'm a foot ball."

"Are you dear?" laughed her mother. "That's a funny thing to play you are, but

Jimmy would be delighted if he knew you were one. I'm afraid he would sometimes rather have a foot ball than a small sister! Do you want to bring your little rocker and watch your 'flustrated' mother mend poor old Rosamund's hands?"

"I can't watch if I'm a ball, can I?" asked Gussie dully. But she dragged her little willow chair across the room, nevertheless, and dropped into it close to her mother's side. She laid her head over on her mother's arm and settled down to see Rosamund repaired without a sign of interest, although she had long begged to have the forlorn doll's hands put on.

"Doesn't my little Gussette feel as fine as silk?" asked Mrs. Brett, quoting the child's own way of expressing health, and passing her sensitive motherly hand over the little forehead.

"I don't know. 'Sides I'm a foot ball," persisted Gussie languidly.

"She doesn't feel warm. Perhaps it's a case for the Thing-That-We-Never-Mention, just a teaspoonful of the Fairy?" hinted Mrs. Brett. "Little Aunt Ailsa doesn't know about that! We play that Castor oil is a good fairy that comes in an ugly guise, just as good fairies often do, and brings kind gifts. So we take her right in and try to be grateful before she has made us feel better—like the letter writers who end: 'Thanking you in advance.' Don't we, Gussie-baby?"

"Foot balls don't," said Gussie, and her mother did not continue a subject that, at the best, was not pleasant to quite all present.

"We'll mend Rosamund first, and then the elephant, for they are the only two who can miss their parts; the rest are dishes and vases and such stupid things," Mrs. Brett went on, busily sponging Rosamund's wrists to make them ready for the cement. "We've actually forgotten the hot water! Tilly, run out and ask Amanda to give you half a cupful of boiling water to set the cement bottle in, please, daughterlein."

Ailsa sat in her favorite attitude, watching and listening. She wondered anew, as she had wondered ever since she had come to this home-like house, exactly why she was listening and watching with such interest, and with such profound content in her heart. Molly-Mary was not saying anything; she was only talking to amuse Gussie, who seemed dull. Nor was there anything interesting in seeing a shabby doll made ready for mending. But Molly-Mary's voice was full of warm, blithe sweetness, her cadences rose and fell with music that was at the same time a caress. Her face was smiling, eyes and lips; even the "flustered" bright hair, that never was smooth, seemed to smile. Her hands were strong, white, the forefinger of the left one honorably scarred from sewing. There was no ring on them, except the plain wedding band; they were the sort of useful, skillful hands that it is a pleasure to watch, but, more than that, they were the sort of hands that look kind and trusty, maternal hands, full of the best sort

of character. For hands have expression scarcely less distinct than faces.

"Thank you, Tilly-Pilly," Mrs. Brett said, as Tilly reappeared. "What are you laughing at?"

"Amanda said: 'Are you going to cement the things that were waiting?' And I said we were. Then she said it was awful in-cement weather, and I didn't know what she meant, but it sounded so funny!" explained Tilly.

"Inclement, she must have meant!" cried Ailsa and Nan together, and they all joined in Tilly's laugh.

"Poor old, funny old, nice Amanda! She gets hold of the most unlikely words, and then only by the tip of their wings as they fly by!" laughed Mrs. Brett. "Now about the pink china, Ailie!" she went on, dropping the cement bottle gingerly into the exceedingly hot water that Tilly had fetched. "Your great grandfather—your great-great grandfather—no, your great grandfather. I always forget that such a small girl is of the same generation as my husband! Your great-grandfater went to England in the first year of the nineteenth century, in 1800. He was only a boy, about fifteen, and he went over to visit relatives who were so distantly kin that the relationship was rather one of courtesy than of fact. The Bretts, who came to Massachusetts more than a hundred years before then, had bequeathed to their descendants a correspondence with their kin in England, and this had been kept up so long that the only tie

was the name. William Brett, your great grandfather, was invited to go and make the acquaintance of the English Bretts of his day. So he went. And when he was returning—by one of those 'fast packets' of 1803, which made the voyage in about two months!—one of the gifts he received in parting was this set of pink glazed china, from an old Brett lady to whom your young great grandfather had become greatly attached and who was the mother of Squire Brett, the head of the English family. The dear old lady told this William Brett that the china was part of her wedding outfit, and that it was given to her with a sort of good luck attachment, so to say. That it was to bring its owner happiness 'in the home, in marriage, and prosperity.' Your brother does not know whether the spell has always worked well. The china had come down in the family, unbroken, undivided, until his day. Then a little of it went, he did not know where—that must be the few pieces you have seen at home. His sister had a part of it, which we now have, as I told you, and Augustus had received the greater part of it from his father, when he left home. No one could be happier in our home life and in each other than your brother and I! We are not rich; that is the one part of the spell lacking fulfilment. Gus laughs and says that the old spell works still in the most important ways, and if it lacks some power it is probably because the set is no longer complete, which would account for the incompleteness of the luck it

brings. It is rather a nice little family tradition, isn't it? I'm deeply attached to the pink glaze china. If you've heard all this before, Ailsa, I don't know what I shall do to you for letting me tell it to you! It never occurred to me till this moment that you might have known the story!"

"I didn't!" cried Ailsa. "It's a dear story. It makes me feel quite set up and noble, to have a Tradition in the Family! It's 'most as fine as a family ghost and ever so much pleasanter. You see father died when I was so tiny that he never had a chance to tell me about the pink set and I don't believe mother knew anything of it. She likes the old pink sugar bowl and teapot, but that's because it is old and so perfectly squat. Molly-Mary, Gussie's asleep."

"Why, so she is!" exclaimed Mrs. Brett, looking startled. "At this hour! I'm afraid she isn't well. I will lay her on the couch and cover her up warm. Tilly, the clinical thermometer is in my dressing table drawer, the right corner; will you please get it, dear?"

Mrs. Brett raised Gussie and carried her over to the couch, where she held her, half sitting, while Nan shook up the pillows and made a cozy nest for the child's head. Gussie murmured and said something about "a football" again, but did not waken as her mother laid her into the hollow of the pillows. Tilly came back with the thermometer which, held in Gussie's mouth for two minutes, recorded a hundred and three degrees of temperature.

"Does it mean anything bad, Molly-Mary?" asked Ailsa, startled by her sister-in-law's gravity of expression.

"It means that the child is ill; that is all one can say at first," said Mrs. Brett. "Nan—Oh, Nan must have gone to do what I was going to ask her to do, get Gussie's bed ready and her night clothes out."

For Nan, experienced in the sicknesses of her juniors, had anticipated her mother's need and disappeared. Again Ailsa was impressed. She never before had known a girl of her own age who would have been promptly, intelligently ready to meet this sort of an emergency.

Mrs. Brett lifted Gussie, who wakened whimpering and still insisting that she was a football, which they knew now was a fancy of delirium and not a "make-believe," as they had thought when Gussie first announced her transformation.

"Tilly and I will walk backward and hold her up in the middle so she won't sag; she is too heavy for you," said Jimmy seriously, and carried out his own suggestion with benefit to both Gussie and his mother. Thus they went up stairs.

Ailsa lingered where she was, not feeling sure that there was any kindness in following where she could not be useful. But she felt so cast down and frightened that she sought Amanda in the kitchen.

"Amanda," she said, accepting the chair which Amanda set forward for her, "what could

Gussie have that would begin by her thinking she was a football and falling off asleep—when we were all talking, and she wasn't comfortable and having a fever, a hundred and three degrees? Her mother has taken her to bed."

"Laws, Miss Ailie, heaps o' things!" cried Amanda, startled in her turn. "Is dat de way 'tis wif dat chile now? I couldn't rightly tell you what der ain't dat starts in like you says fo' little folks. Po' Mis' Brett! She's pow'ful anxious when one o' dem draps down sick."

"I wish I could help her," said Ailsa, "but I don't know one single thing about it. Amanda, if Gussie were very ill—well, I suppose they would have a nurse?"

"Miss Ailie, I'll tell you 'bout 'dat," said Amanda with an important air. "Mis' Brett she might git someone in to let her sleep long 'nough to be 'round de res' de time, but she ain't one to let no strained nuhses take de responsumbility o' savin' de life of any one of dese yere chil'em. Yo' sister, Mis' 'Gustus Brett, is de mos' 'sclusive mother o' her chil'en what I 'member to have seen, nof' or souf'. When dey's well she's jes' livin' to keep 'em so an' good an' happy for good measuments. An' when dey gits sick she hangs ovah 'em an' onto 'em till dey ain't no show fo' 'em to do nothin' else 'cept git well. An' I'll go on to tell you mo. If little Gussie was to be right down bad you an' Nan could keep house, an' dat'd be helpin'. Mis' Brett she wouldn't be 'round none to make things right fo' you' pa—you' brother, I mean—

an' for Dins, an' to keep watchin' Tilly. I'm goin' tell you, Miss Ailie, what I nevah in my life time seen—an' I don't rightly know how ol I was my las' birfday, which comes 'gain de twelf Feb'ry, like de good Lincolum's—so what evah age 'twas it's mos' somepin' else by now—but I ain't nevah seen nobody hon'es' wishin' to fin' somepin' to do what ain't foun' it, an' dey mos' in gen'l fin' it, wif such a lot mo' on top de firs' job, dat you couldn't make out de size an' shape of what de firs' job really look' like—all de res' would 'a' come pilin' an' runnin' into it like de way dose chocolate camels Nan makes runs together in de pan! I near Jimmy callin' up de tel'phone."

They listened and heard Jimmy summon the doctor. So little Gussie was really ill!

"Nan, what is it. How is the baby?" cried Ailsa, running to meet Nan in the hall as she heard her light step on the stairs.

"Mumsy thinks it is probably one of the contagious diseases. She hopes measles, but fears scarlet fever," said Nan, looking troubled. "Measles are bad enough, but scarlet fever! None of us has had it. However, mumsy expressly told me not to bear trouble that had not come, and to tell you not to. The reason Gussette thinks she's a football is that she has pain all over her body; we found that out. You and I are promoted; we are to keep house. Tilly will be an angel child while we're in trouble; she always is. I hope the doctor won't be long!"

He was not long; he came in less than an

hour, and when he went away the Brett house was quarantined; but not for measles, not for the dreaded fever.

"Mumsy is going to take care of Gussie—of course. She always shuts herself up with the sick one; that's the big figure we set down in our profit column when one of us is sick—mumsy, fancy things to eat and being the important one! That's to balance all the ways we feel miserable, wanting to be up and out, losing what's going on, all that. If you ask me I believe it makes up for all the rest to have mumsy all to yourself, waiting on you, reading to you, singing softly, talking, shaking up your pillows, smoothing your hair, calling you lovely names! And you feel as if you deserved them, too! You feel so nice and weak and angelic, uncomfortable but patient! Really, I think it's great to be sick. When you're half way well, that's the fearful time! You girls will have to coddle daddy and me while we're minus mother." Dins came home to hear the news and this was the way he received it.

"You may as well coddle us," returned Nan. "We're just as minus! More, because you'll get out of going to school, and we weren't going.

"You know I want to go!" cried Dins, with pardonable heat. "Whose promotion was I after anyhow?"

"Some district messenger boy's, name unknown," interposed Ailsa. "Does quarantine forbid visitors?"

"Ham Gravy and Giddy will come around;

we won't be in the Gussette's room, and they had measles," said Dins.

"And Mona and Kit had them when I did, when we were eight. If they all come nights it won't be bad." Nan spoke hopefully. "I should think we could work on the play."

But as it turned out these members of the Hit-or-Miss Club did not venture to the Bretts, because there were younger children at home and because, if they should be debarred from several good times occurring in these days before Christmas the penalty would be severe. So Ailsa and Nan spent two dragging weeks of dependence upon their own family resources, being tremendously good, at first with enthusiasm, then with patience and finally with weariness of spirit.

Ailsa had no idea of how irksome a round of duties could be until she performed them with her unaccustomed hands. Nan got on better because she had helped her mother all her life, but Ailsa, Ailsa to whom her tasks were so new that she took hold awkwardly, Ailsa with her quickness and flashing gaiety in harness, was like a fire-fly in a treadmill. But it was good for her; she learned much besides how to use her hands; she learned what one woman can be to a household who is its heart, its brains, its dependence.

"Doesn't it seem just as if someone had cut the head off this house and it was just flopping around like a chicken?" cried Tilly, one night out of the depths of a loneliness that could be

cut. For Mrs. Brett had secluded herself entirely from her family and by that means had raised the quarantine, to the extent that Dins might continue with his class, this year being such an important one to him.

"Nothing looks in order, either, not the way it does when mumsy is about," said Nan, surveying the room dissatisfiedly. "Ailsa and I pick up and pick up, but nothing looks finished."

Mr. Brett looked up with a particularly cordial smile. "You've done wonders, you two young Marthas," he said. "I've noticed a great many points and scored them to you. What are you thinking of, Ailsa?" he added, for Ailsa was in a brown study.

"The pink china," said Ailsa promptly. Indeed she had been considering the pink china all these days since Molly-Mary had told her about it. She could add something to that story and she felt more and more sure that her addition would be important. But just how or when to add it, where her duty lay in case her addition to the story should mean what she began to feel sure it would mean, was a puzzle never long absent from her mind.

"The pink china!" exclaimed her brother. "Of all things to think of so hard! Cheer up, children, the dear lady of the house will soon be down here. The doctor told me that Gussie might sit up to-morrow. After all we are so glad that the baby had no complications, lungs

and eyes are all right, that we can afford to forget discomfort."

"The lady of the house is to be down tonight," said a voice behind the hall portiere.

"Oh, say!" cried Dins, beating the others to the goal they all stormed, screaming like Comanches. For it was Mumsy, Molly-Mary herself, paler, tired-looking from her confinement, but just as merry, smiling, lovable, cheery and several other things as ever.

"Oh, my, but we're glad!" sighed Nan fervently.

"Are we!" emphasized Jimmy.

"Molly-Mary, you're the whole thing! 'Molly, there's nae luck about the house when the gude wife's awa,' " misquoted her husband as Ailsa spoke, jumping up to lead the blessed woman to a chair.

Nan looked contentedly around the room. "Isn't it funny!" she cried. "Everything looks in spick and span order and perfectly all right now!"

"Mum's the word!" said Tilly, and nobody could be sure whether this was wit or a misapprehension of a familiar quotation on her part.

CHAPTER IX

THE PENDULUM SWINGS

Ailsa was conscious of having been exceedingly good. Nan had been quite as good, but it did not seem to matter so much. Nan was rather like a spark, in one sense; it was natural for her to fly upward. But in the other sense Ailsa was far more like a spark; she loved to flash and snap and crackle. And, after all, anyone who has ever sat beside a wood fire on a hearth knows that sparks fly outward almost as much as they tend upward—and it is dangerous.

All the while that little Gussie had been ill Ailsa had been as staid and helpful as Nan herself, and now that time was over Ailsa was conscious of being somewhat weary of well-doing and ready for almost anything that might offer in the way of a good time. She did not say so to herself, but she felt as we all feel when we have been particularly virtuous, as though she had earned the right to relax.

"I thought we'd get up the play for Christmas, before Christmas, and give it for a charity, but there won't be time," she said pensively to Nan. "Do you think we could give a concert?"

"I think we'd have to give it!" laughed Nan, with an emphasis on the "give." "Nobody would come otherwise. And do you really

mean to get up a play for a charity, Ailsa? We never could! And what charity?"

"I don't know. Found the charity if we had to! Renwyck hasn't a day nursery, for one thing; I asked. That would be a good thing to start, and appropriate for us young things. There must be plenty to give to; there always is," said Ailsa.

"The reason there isn't a day nursery is because so few women go out to work by the day, and those that do go take their babies with them; at least Mrs. Rafferty does when she comes here," said Nan.

"How about the mills?" asked Ailsa.

"Oh, my! I don't know one thing about them! Over at East Renwyck they are," cried Nan, looking at Ailsa with respectful wonder.

"To be honest, you know, I don't care so much for the day nursery as for an Excuse, with a capital E., as it's to be a kind of an institution," said Ailsa truthfully. "If charitable ladies told the truth I think they'd say the same, lots of them. I've watched them, mother's friends. Once in a while there is one that you can see is just fine, wants to help suffering and all that, but lots of them love to be on committees and have tea after they meet, and get up bazars and entertainments—I know it! And I'm just as bad, only I'm too young to matter and I'm not going to keep it up and I'm not pretending to be unselfish. Nanny let's have a concert for some poor kiddies! The Hit-or-Miss Club, you know! We can play well

enough for them! No, we can play bad enough, bad enough for them to kick their feet keeping time, and have an upglorious time. Will you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I wonder if the Sunday School would let us give one? Or Miss Broad?" said Nan, half captured by the suggestion.

"Who's Miss Broad?" asked Ailsa.

"She's the loveliest thing! Only you have to look below the surface of her to see it," said Nan. "Her name is so funny! She's just as tall and narrow as she can be, but we think her name struck in, for there's nothing about her heart that isn't broad enough to hold the world. She has a little school of little children, where they learn little lessons, and play little games, and the scholars have to be more than a little poor to get in. She does it as a charity, and because she's so crazy to have lots and lots of children around her. She isn't one bit pretty, and she dresses so queer that you'd think the children would feel stiff and shy with her, but they swarm around her and love her to distraction."

"Children know. Didn't you ever notice that a poor scared street cat will look at you hard when you pass, ready to run, but if you smile she comes to you and mews? Of course dogs do," said Ailsa.

"Mew? Not in Renwyck," observed Nan, and they both giggled. "But I know what you mean; animals and children are like that; they feel something in people. Miss Broad's kiddy-

wees feel how she loves them. She takes in all the lost animals and looks after them, too."

"She sounds perfectly lovely. Will she let us give a concert at her school for Christmas?" asked Ailsa.

"She probably would think we were angelic to offer," Nan replied. "She couldn't say no, if she wanted to; we're still too young for Miss Broad to refuse us anything. What makes you so anxious to give a concert, Ailsa?"

"Just to have the fun of getting it up, something going on," said Ailsa promptly. "Will you come with me this instant and ask this Broad and gentle lady to let us play in her school?"

"Yes, I don't mind," laughed Nan. "Broad and gentle lady is precisely what she is. Get ready, you silly Ailsa, and I'll take you to see Miss Broad."

Ailsa flew to her pretty little golden room and soon came out again, all smiles and bright-eyed, under the drooping brim of her large hat.

"Do you know, Nan, I've just had a chill? It went all down my spine——"

"Not far," murmured Nan.

"And then wilted me everywhere," Ailsa ignored her interruption. "It was caused by the calendar. Christmas is a week from next Wednesday!"

" 'Course it is. What then?" asked Nan, hurriedly turning over the contents of her neckwear box to find precisely the bow she required.

"But next Wednesday!" persisted Ailsa. "I

thought it was a week from the Wednesday after that."

"Of all ways to say it!" cried Nan. "Why not two weeks from Wednesday? It must have shocked you! But only suppose it were a week from last Wednesday! Now I'm ready Auntie dear; come along."

"Auntie dear" came along very readily. They went down the Main street, called thus in the usual simple, direct manner of naming used by American towns the size of Renwyck. Then they turned aside and walked a considerable distance, till they reached a neighborhood new to Alisa, a poor neighborhood of uniform little houses, differing chiefly in the labels on the tin cans which held the straggling geraniums in the windows, or in the absence of any attempt at flowers or decorations and the substitution of degrees of plainness, merging into untidiness.

"I didn't know there were places like this in Renwyck," said Ailsa. "We ought to be able to get up an entertainment to help people like these."

Nan shook her head. "They're not really poor. I mean they wouldn't want charity. Miss Broad's kindergarten is in that house, the one with the bow window full of blooming plants. She lives there all winter. Isn't she dear? She has a pretty house, in a nice part of town, but she stays here; she says she wants to be a real neighbor to people that want her."

"It must be a little hard to be a social settlement all by oneself," remarked Ailsa.

Nan went up the brief walk that led to the door, struggling to pull her face into sobriety after Ailsa's last speech.

Miss Broad had seen them from her school room and dispatched the twins to let them in. "The Twins," thought of in capitals, were an institution in Hobson street, being the only ones of their kind and as healthy, bright and pretty as though each of the pair was the only one—in short, as if they had not been twins.

Consequently, it was at once plain to the roomful of small pupils that sending the Twins to the door meant that Miss Broad was receiving guests whom she wished to honor.

When the kindergartners saw the two pretty young girls come in, bright of eye and cheek from the December wind, they knew at once that Miss Broad, was right in wishing to honor them, for they were of the right age and appearance to be ideal visitors.

"My dear Nan Brett!" exclaimed Miss Broad, rising and coming forward.

Ailsa saw a tall woman whose age was impossible for her to guess, dressed not only plainly, but peculiarly and so thin and narrowly built that her name was as funny as a caricature. But as Miss Broad kissed Nan's cold, soft cheek, and turned to greet Ailsa, when Nan mentioned her name, Ailsa saw the look in the deep eyes and felt the magnetism that made the children, as Nan had said, "swarm around her." It was the unmistakable look and atmosphere of utter goodness, unselfishness, love for the little and

helpless and for the beautiful things that God has made and entrusted to man to take care of, as to the eldest son of the great family that peoples the earth. Ailsa smiled up at the singular face above her with a warmth that surprised herself, instantly yielding Miss Broad the trusting affection that the animals and children give her. To her amazement she found herself suddenly wishing to give a Christmas entertainment for this little kindergarten that would really delight its teacher. So contagious is goodness that Ailsa lost sight of her desire to "have something going on" in the desire to make happy this woman who spent her life making others happy.

"I heard of the Brett children's maiden aunt," said Miss Broad with a smile, and if she was plain, her voice was most beautiful and her smile an illumination.

"Wasn't it a good joke?" said Ailsa. "They knew I was only a half sister of their father's, yet they thought I had to be a whole aunt."

"I can see you're a dear little girl, at least; I like people who laugh with their eyes," said Miss Broad, laying a carressing hand on Ailsa's shoulder. "How good it is for Nan to have a sister of her own age! And what dear girls you are to come all this distance to visit Amabel Broad's kindergarten! Now come and take the seats of honor on the platform and my chickens shall be put through their paces for you. We'll sing, and play musical games, and dance, and recite—won't we, Small Ones?"

"Yes, Miss Broad, dear," cried the little school in chorus.

"We really didn't come to visit the school, Miss Broad," said Nan. "I don't believe that we ought to stay long, because mother was out when we came away and I forgot to tell Amanda where we were going. We came on an errand. We have a musical club—just for fun, you know. Ailsa plays the piano splendidly and the boys—Dins, Hamilton Graves, Gid Davis, Jimmy, with an ocarina, all play an instrument, and we get father to help us with his flute. It's pretty funny, but it isn't bad, when they play gay things. I'm supposed to sing with them. Ailsa thought—now you tell the rest, Ailsie."

"I thought, maybe you'd let us give an entertainment to the children at Christmas," said Ailsa, but got no further for shame. Miss Broad's lovely smile lit up her plain face with an actual glow, and her kind eyes beamed on Ailsa.

"You dear little creature!" she cried in her sweet voice. "And a perfect stranger! You *dear* little creature!"

"You must understand," said Ailsa bravely, "I didn't think of it for you; I didn't know of you, nor of the school. I wanted to get up a concert, just to have something going on. We were going to have a play at Christmas, but my brother's little Gussie had measles, and we couldn't do it. So I wanted something to get up, have going on. It wasn't one bit goodness, you see. Then Nan suggested maybe you'd

let us give an entertainment here, and we came to ask you. Now, all at once, I do want it to be nice and to please you, make the children have a fine time, but that's just come into me. It wasn't anything but a lark in the first place. Instead of being dear in me, I'm rather ashamed. But I'll do my best to help make it fine, in order to please you, now, if you'll let us come."

Nan listened to this in astonishment, but respectfully. What a queer little bundle of impulses Ailsa was! But Nan understood that Ailsa had been violently attracted by this plain, middle-aged lady before them, and she also understood why. Miss Amabel Broad was absolutely lovely and a girl as warmly impulsive as Ailsa wanted to be crystal clear to her kind eyes and to begin fair her worship of Miss Broad.

"It is nothing to be ashamed of to want to find a peg to hang a good time upon; what could be more highly right than for a young girl to be gay. I don't think that I shall take back my dictum that you are a dear little creature! Perhaps I shall emphasize it a wee bit, because there isn't anything so fine as perfect honesty. And it is sweet of you, dear little Brown Girl, to want to please us, now that you see what a little school of ordinary little bits of boys and girls ours is. At least our splendor isn't dazzling you!" Miss Broad rested one hand lightly on Ailsa's shoulder, tipped up her chin with the other, looked steadily a moment into the girl's dark eyes, nodded, and let her go.

"Yes," Miss Broad said, but did not explain

to what she assented. "Indeed I'll gladly and gratefully accept your offer to give us an entertainment! The children will be enraptured over it, nice, bright songs—perhaps?—which they know, played by musicians, who are only larger-sized youngsters than they are! Indeed, dear Nan, I'm delighted that you guided your little aunt to me! And may we have some Christmas hymns? I like to have the children's feast marked by remembrance of the Divine Child; not all Santa Claus and mere joviality, you know!"

"Indeed you may, Miss Broad!" cried Nan. "The Hit-or-Miss Club shall play, and then we'll sing ever so many Christmas carols and hymns for you."

"Thank you, dear Nannie! Hit-or-Miss Club. Is that its name? And why?" asked Miss Broad.

"Oh, because they sometimes hit and often miss playing well," said Nan. "We must go home, Miss Broad. We'll settle the date for the entertainment next week."

"I wish we could show you how accomplished we are," said Miss Broad, looking at the children wistfully; the whole little lot of small tots—twenty-six of them—were behaving with exemplary quiet during this call. "When we have anyone here who can play the music of Anitra's Dance, Grieg's Peer Gynt suite, you know—these small things, led by the twins, dance it all around the room. I think they do it well. Most of them are the leaves in the

forest and they wave their arms and pat their hands in the most realistic way!"

There was something irresistible in the simplicity of Miss Broad's whimsical, yet genuine wistfulness to have her little pupils "show off."

Ailsa pulled off her gloves rapidly. "I can play it, Miss Broad; I love it, and the whole Peer Gynt. I'll play it and then we must run away."

Miss Broad beamed delightedly. In a moment Ailsa was playing a bright little air to get the children on their feet and in line. Then she began the alluring Anitra's dance; she played it as Ailsa played everything, with spirit, yet with poetical feeling. In the midst of her watchfulness of her small, chubby dancers, Miss Broad found time to wonder at the precocity of Ailsa's talent.

The funny little pinafored tots really had caught something of the feeling of the music. It spoke volumes for what Miss Broad was in herself and to them, that she had informed these tiny creatures, out of homes where inspiration did not lurk, with so much of the proper interpretation of the music. The Twins especially were delightful, dancing backward, waving their brief arms alluringly, moving rhythmically, though at moments their balance was endangered. And all the other little bunches of solemn babyhood danced after them swayingly, patting their plump hands to represent the patter of wind-swept leaves in the forest.

It was a triumphant success. The children, short-breathed, round-eyed, and visibly bursting with pride under Miss Broad's approval, rolled sideways into their seats again. Miss Broad kissed and thanked her visitors warmly, and the girls found themselves once more in the narrow street, retracing their steps homeward.

"Why in the world didn't you take me to see that darlingest little kindergarten before? And tell me about Miss Broad, purposely, not accidentally?" demanded Ailsa. "I think she's just like seeing goodness, not just like a good woman, but plain goodness."

"I suppose she is plain," said Nan, pretending to misunderstand.

"Oh, you know I don't mean that! Simple goodness, then! But she's simple, too. Never mind you know quite well what I'm trying to say. Goodness all by itself, just walking around," Ailsa went on. "It is so beautiful to see her living there, training those little puddings of youngsters! Isn't it queer how a plain person can be beautiful?"

"I'm glad you think Miss Broad is beautiful," said Nan quietly. "And I may as well tell you that I've been kind of worshipping Miss Amabel since I was Gussie's age. Isn't she not-broad?"

"She is certainly thin and narrow," Ailsa agreed. "I kept thinking of that old puzzle; you know! Someone makes a tall, narrow A., with two lines beside it and tells you to guess what book and author it represents. It's: 'In no sense a broad, by Mark Twain'—'Innocents

Abroad, by Mark Twain'—it isn't grammatical; there are two marks. However, puzzles usually squirm. She is in no sense A. Broad, and her initial is A. I kept saying that to myself. But she's lovely." Ailsa considered in silence as they walked on. Suddenly she burst out with: "Nan, I've been thinking! I never saw people like duckie Molly-Mary and Miss Broad! They aren't alike, yet they are. Molly-Mary is simple, too, and lovable and loving. But she's merry and close-by, if you know, and so sunny-happy with all of us! While Miss Broad is like someone that was contented and never wanted anything for herself at all. I think it must do a lot of good to anyone just to know such people. They're both a kind I'd like to be, and I may as well be truthful—lots of good people make me glad I'm not good!"

Nan laughed till a grocer's boy, passing with his basket on his arm, smiled widely in sympathy. "Are you very wicked?" she asked.

"No, but you know what I mean! Making a regular business of being good, thinking of it and getting ready for it every morning. Molly-Mary and this Miss Broad seem to be the kind that never bother about it at all, but just *are* good! Aren't those the Brower girls coming?" asked Ailsa.

"Speaking of saints!" laughed Nan. "Yes, that is Reine and Billie—no, Irma! They look alike in pairs, the oldest and the third one, the second one and the fourth. That's Irma."

"Hello, people! People, hello!" cried Irma

Brower waving her muff as Reine darted on ahead of her to greet the Brett girls. "We were wishing we could see you and saying we guessed we'd risk it," cried Reine, hugging Ailsa enthusiastically and patting Nan on the shoulder. "Nice like Nannie! We like you heaps. Nan's mother isn't stuck on the Brower girls. Most of the mothers in Renwyck seem to think we're terrors; we're not! We didn't know whether we'd better go to see you, or not, after the measles had quit. I said that was silly, weren't we asked to the party?"

"Nobody could come to see us while Gussie was sick. Won't you come back with us now?" asked Nan politely.

"Ailsa likes us," announced Irma.

"Ailsa's a sport, if I know one," added Reine.

Ailsa looked at them, smiling, half attracted, as she had been when she met these girls, by their high spirits, friendliness, cordiality. She wondered why she shrank from being called "a sport," which Reine plainly intended as a compliment.

The Browers looked more cityfied than the other Renwyck girls, yet nothing was exactly right which they wore. Their skirts were too short, too pronounced in the direction of the prevailing fashion in width. Their hats were too large, the trimmings put on at too acute angles; their gloves were too largely wrinkled, too manifestly mannish; their buttons were too big, their muffs too decided in shape; their boas had too many tails and paws and were

flung too rakishly over the shoulder, and each girl wore a corsage bouquet of artificial violets, slightly scented. Though they were dressed in quiet colors they produced an aggregate of effects that summed up into a total of bad taste, of ill-breeding. Ailsa felt all this, yet was annoyed with herself for feeling it and so went further than she otherwise would have done in being friendly to the girls. It was a curious little piece of contrariness that she could not, later on, explain.

"It's perfect nonsense to talk as if we didn't want you," she said. "It isn't much like a sport, if that's what you want to be, to imagine people aren't friendly. Did you want to see us for anything special?"

"For your own duckie little sake, and that's special enough," said Irma Brower, beaming on Ailsa. "But there was something else. We're going out as waits on Christmas eve. We're going to dress up and go around singing at the different houses—of course we'll pick out the best ones for the joke. We'll have fun if ever we did! We want you to go with us—Nan, too, of course, if she'll come. We're going to ask Dins, but we're afraid Nan's mother won't want her to go. Will you come? Do, Ailsa! It'll be the best ever. Billie will dress up as a boy; she makes the best boy you ever saw. Wouldn't you like a gay old frolic like that? If you would, can't you come, even if Nan or Dins doesn't? Mrs. Brett won't forbid you, will she? You're

a guest and can do as you like, can't you? What about you, Nan?"

Nan shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Irma. Mother lets us do almost everything we think of, but I know she'd dislike that," she said. "I don't believe I'd care about it myself," she added. "Thank you."

"You seem to be talking in a lot of postscripts," said Irma, laughing, but looking annoyed. "We hardly thought you'd be in for one of our good times, but take it from me, Nannie Brett, we're the bunch in Renwyck that has the good times! Come along that night, Ailsa, do! There isn't one bit of harm in our jamborees; we don't burgle, nor commit any crimes! Will you join in?"

"I don't know," hesitated Ailsa, and somewhere in the back of her sane and critical brain she wondered why she hesitated, for she felt repulsion amid the attraction these too-lively, too-slangy, too-pronounced girls had for her. Unfortunately Nan glanced at her warningly, with a slight, a very slight shake of the head, but not so slight that Reine, whose eyes were like a hawk's, missing nothing, did not see it.

"Oh, Nan, let Ailsa decide for herself!" Reine protested. Her tone was good natured, but her sharp eyes flashed anger and contempt.

"I—perhaps I will go," said Ailsa then. "I can't promise till I find out if there is anything going on at home Christmas eve that would keep me. I'll let you know. What would I have to have for a costume?"

"Rags!" cried Reine. "Any old thing! The older and the queerer, the better. You'll die when you see us. And if there was anything that you really had to get back for you could cut out the last of our fun. We're going out by eight and we mean to get through by ten and end up with a dance in our togs. Now don't you give us the slip, you little peacherino, for we want you."

"All of you going? Miss Brower and Miss Irma are so much more grown up than I am," said Ailsa.

"Oh, cut it out!" cried Irma. "Miss Brower and Miss Irma! I'm not at all obliged to you for that and Bess wouldn't be. We're all kids in a bunch, and you may be little, but I see you're not half as free and easy and lively as we are! Yes, you are!" she added. "You're full of the mischief, but you've been tied up the way girls are. We don't care a cent, neither does our mother, about what people say, and the quicker you find out you may as well do as you please in this world, the better off you'll be."

"Well, so long, then, if here's where we part," said Reine, as the four girls halted on the corner of the street which they had reached by this time. "Whatever you do don't give us the slip that night."

Nan suffered agonies on the way home, due to her prudent holding of her peace. She longed to tell Ailsa that she should not so much as have entertained the Brower girls' suggestion.

But she forebore, being wise enough to recognize that, for some unexplained reason, these girls set Ailsa to contradicting herself and that the less she said about it the more likely Ailsa was to let them alone.

"Do you keep Christmas eve particularly, or do you celebrate on Christmas day proper?" asked Ailsa as they neared the house.

"We have our presents Christmas morning, if you mean that," said Nan. "But Christmas eve we keep in another way. We sing Christmas carols all the evening, and hymns, too. And we read poems about Christmas, and maybe a particularly nice Christmas story, and then mumsy reads the Christmas gospel and we go to bed ready to hear the angels! Truly, Ailsa, I believe all we children feel as though we were in Bethlehem that night! Mumsy is so dear—and daddy helps."

Ailsa was silent. Then she kissed Nan on the lower step, to the amusement of Jimmy, watching from a window.

"I don't know why I even thought of going that night! I won't go Nancy! But I half like those girls; they sort of fascinate me. Some other day I'm going to do something they ask me to do. But I was wrong this time. Don't tell Molly-Mary I thought of running away on Christmas eve for a jollification with the Browers. I haven't had your sort of Christmas keeping; it's fine!" she said, and Nan had to be satisfied with this victory.

CHAPTER X

RESTING MERRY

"God rest ye merry, gentlemen," sang Nan at the top of her sweet voice the day after Christmas. "Mumsy, why is it 'rest ye merry, gentlemen?' Most people say 'rest ye, merry gentlemen.' Wouldn't you expect it to be merry gentlemen who were to be rested?" she interrupted herself to ask.

"I shouldn't expect a wish for rest on Christmas, in a carol. 'Rest' means, in Elizabethan English, 'to keep' in a case like this. The carol really says: 'God keep ye merry, gentlemen.' It is not correct to put the hyphen before the word merry. Shakespeare uses rest in this way, wishing someone to rest, keep in health or happiness. Nan, dear, what is Ailsa doing?" asked Mrs. Brett.

Nan's face clouded. "She is in her room writing a poem of thanks to Mona," she said.

"For her present? It certainly deserves a poem!" smiled Mrs. Brett.

Nan sighed. Then she brightened, with evident intent to do so; the processes of Nan's mind were always easily followed. "It was beautiful. Isn't it fine that Ailsa and Mona like each other so much!" she said with elaborate enthusiasm.

Mrs. Brett hid a smile that was all tender understanding and no amusement.

"Perhaps it is love me love my little contemporaneous aunt!" she suggested. "Mona has been fond of Nannie long enough to include all that Nannie loves."

But all the time Nan's mother knew that her dear girl was far more capable of a deep affection than her friend was.

Nan kissed her mother without a word. The best of a mother is that she always sees through one, but so lovingly that she is the only one in the world from whom one has no desire to hide each hidden thought.

"We're going to practise our programme this morning," said Nan, after this silent, grateful acceptance of the balm given her unspoken hurt. For Mona had sent Ailsa a little finger ring that would go straight to any girl's heart, with a note saying that she "wanted to see it on Ailsa's hand, never removed, but worn day and night to remind Ailsa that her new friend, Mona Chapman, loved her as if she had known her all her life." Ailsa had laughed and said that the ring wouldn't remind her of anything during the night, for she was a good sleeper, but she slipped it on her finger at once and set about writing Mona a poem of gratitude early the day after Christmas. Nan knew that Ailsa was greatly pleased with her ring and that she considered writing verses her highest form of expression of love and gratitude. Nan's own present from Mona had been a pretty Parisian

ivory buffer in its tray. It was as valuable as Ailsa's gift, but no one reckons the value of gifts in money, no one worth counting; it is a gift's value in sentiment that weighs, and Ailsa's ring seemed far more personal and expressive than Nan's buffer. It was not mean jealousy; Nan could hardly help feeling a little hurt.

"Are you going over the entire programme?" asked Mrs. Brett. "Isn't it time you were beginning, then?"

"We were waiting for the boys; I'll go see if they've come," said Nan, and hastened away. Passing Ailsa's door she paused. Ailsa, seen through the door ajar, looked pretty enough to hug in her dark crimson gown, her cheeks matching it and her eyes dilated with the fire of genius. For Ailsa was just sealing the envelope of her poetic effusion of thanks to Mona. So, as she looked pretty enough to hug, Nan ran in and hugged her, moved by that fact and by an unspoken contrition for the hurt she bore from what seemed like Mona's preference for Ailsa, in spite of her long vowed allegiance to Nan.

"What's up?" asked Ailsa, surprised by the caress, but returning the kiss vehemently.

"Nothing, only you looked so nice through the door," said Nan. "Ailsa, if we don't get at our practising we shall never get through before lunch, and the concert is at three."

"We had to wait for the boys, but I hear them down stairs now," returned Ailsa.

"I'm ready. But as to the programme, Nannie, I don't believe we can stick to it, any-

way. I've an idea when we get into that kindergarten entertainment we'll do things we never rehearsed."

The two girls raced down stairs and found the boys waiting for them. Mona and Kit were just coming up the steps. Seeing them through the figures in the glass of the door, Nan and Ailsa opened it to them.

"Hello! Why?" asked Ailsa.

Mona and Kit laughed. "Just because we wanted to come, even if we don't belong to the orchestra. Besides, aren't we to help with the singing?"

"All right; come along in," cried Ailsa. "I wrote you a note to thank you for that perfectly de-li-cious ring; I may as well hand it to you. I was going to post it."

"You've got it on!" cried Mona delightedly. "Oh, Ailsa, please wear it every minute! And it's really awfully becoming to your hand!"

"I'll corral the coral and never let it go!" cried Ailsa, who had no tendency to sentimentality.

"And I like my buffer lots, Mona," said Nan. "And Kit's book is splendid. I read three chapters without stopping the minute I opened it."

"Goodness, my neck chain and pendant is far nicer than that buffer!" cried Mona.

"And my silver scissors are the dearest things! I brought you a penny so they wouldn't do any harm to our friendship," said Kit.

By which time the girls had their things

bestowed on the hall seat and were ready to begin the rehearsal for the entertainment which the Hit-or-Miss Club was to give Miss Broad's kindergarten that night.

It was such a ridiculous rehearsal that the performers were weak with laughter when they got through. Beneath their enjoyment of it, Ailsa and Nan felt more than doubt that the entertainment would be even passable.

"Parents and guardians will wander in; Miss Broad hinted as much, and we ought to do more than puff and giggle, and each come into the tune wherever we happen to hit it," cried Ailsa, having played her accompaniment with zeal and exaggerated accents in a groundless hope of collecting her fellow musicians into unison with her.

"Don't you worry, Ailie; we know more than we show," Dins comforted her. "Take it from me we'll make a hit—not a miss—this time! When we get Tilly and Jim in their dance, and Jim does the hornpipe alone, there'll be joy among the innocents. And we've got a surprise for you; you won't miss dad's flute, as you do now."

"Oh, boys, please don't do anything to spoil it any *spoileder* than it is!" pleaded Nan. "I don't mind the babies, nor Miss Broad, because she's always ready for fun, but perhaps the parents and guardians will take us seriously and be disgusted."

"P's and G's should mind their P's and Q's, and not look a gift horse in the mouth, even

when its mouth is open to blow a cornet, like Ham's here, and Jim's, with his sweet-potato-ocarina wonder, or you girls, singing," declared Dins. "It's nothing bad; you'll be tickled pink, nervous Nannie."

"Well," sighed Nan. "Let's go to lunch. Amanda signalled me while you were playing that last number. There's cold turkey and cranberry and other things from yesterday's dinner, girls and boys; stay to lunch with us."

"No, thanks, Nan!" cried Gid Davis. "We've got to get home and tog out. We've got collars so stiff that it will take us, goodness knows how long to jam the buttons through."

"Well, we couldn't stay; we've all got to dress," said Mona and Kit, hastily rising, discovering all at once that there was occasion for haste, as people have a way of doing.

"All right; stay the next time instead, then," said Dins. "And whatever you beauties do don't let your vanity make you late! Get back here promptly at half past two."

"No, sir; not till quarter to three," said Ham. "I forgot to tell you that I engaged straw and Brown's long delivery sled to hitch our horses to, to take us there."

"Oh, three cheers for our delicious Ham Gravy!" cried Nan, a demand which was met promptly with cheers that should have raised any roof that was not well fastened down.

Luncheon was a hurried meal for all except Jimmy, the calm. He would have done full justice to that meal, always so delicious the day

after Christmas, when one has a mind free to do justice to the good things, if he had been going to be inaugurated president. But the girls were decidedly flustered, nor was Dins as interested as usual in eating; the concert, if it should not be called an entertainment, was an event.

Ailsa put on the crimson frock, with the voluminous depths of accordion pleating which seemed to fall soft and plain till a sudden movement sent it swinging.

Nan was to wear white, for she was the soloist of the occasion, and white best suited the delicate fairness of her girlish beauty. For Nan was growing prettier every day; her childish charm was developing into a deeper charm, while retaining the innocent sweetness that makes a child the fairest thing in the world.

"Oh, Ailsa, but you are lovely! You look like a bed of salvia!" cried Nan, as Ailsa, ready first, came dancing down the hall, her crimson chiffon skirt floating this way and that, like the blossom of salvia in the wind, to which Nan compared it.

"And, oh, Nan, you look lovely! You look like a bed of—poet's narcissus in May!" cried Ailsa, hesitating for her comparison, but ending triumphantly, as the delicate purity of Nan's face inspired her.

Then both girls laughed and hugged each other girlishly, delighted with each other.

"Molly-Mary has a rain coat for one of us and a cloth long coat for the other, so the straw

bottom of the sled can't harm our finery." Ailsa said. "The boys are whistling their heads off; you can hear them from my room. Aren't you ready?"

"If you think I am," said Nan, tying her head up in a scarf. "But I have to get a diploma from mumsy! I never am quite right, you know, till she has seen me and said I am. Come; I'll carry my coat down."

The girls ran down stairs. Mrs. Brett was waiting for them at the foot of the stair-case. "Let me see you from every point, my lassies!" she cried. "Quite right in every detail, except this one little hook at Ailsa's yoke and a bow that looks a bit weary at the back of Nan's collar. There! Now you are all that the most critical kindergarten could ask its entertainers to be! Did you know I was going?"

"No! How perfectly great! I wondered why you had on that gown!" cried Nan.

"Yes. The boys insisted that I must go. Dins says they need a chaperon as much as a cornet," cried this happy mother gleefully. "And Giddy says with a name like his it wouldn't be proper to go without me, so I'm going!" She looked as delighted as the youngest of her flock.

"Molly-Mary Brett, you're a peach!" cried Ailsa, for the unnumbered time, and she managed to give her sister-in-law a hasty kiss while she held her coat for her.

Everybody climbed and tumbled into the clean, fragrant straw in the bottom of the sled, laughing and screaming as everybody, old

and young, does under these circumstances.

"I hope the kids will have half as much fun as we're having," remarked Dins, as he handed Gussie, well wrapped and shapeless, to her mother and helped Tilly to the seat beside the driver, for which she implored with as much emotion as if anyone else wanted it, though no one else did.

"We'll tell them we'll whip them if they don't enjoy themselves, and then they'll be sure to," said Ham.

"Hit-or-Miss club, hit the miss, and also the master, with a club," murmured Giddy, in such an idiotic way that the rest shouted—though they laughed at everything and nothing every foot of the road.

The performers stopped to pick up Mona and Kit, who were waiting for them impatiently, and then the horses trotted the remaining distance, speeding along, seeming to enjoy their bells and the laughing, singing, whistling passengers in the sled which had runners so smooth that pulling it was only a pleasure to the strong animals.

Miss Broad met the performers at the door of the house. All the other little houses in the narrow street were alive with spectators to the arrival, for the fact that the children were to be entertained that afternoon was known to the neighborhood; indeed Miss Broad's small house was invaded by many grown-ups from the other small houses.

"Isn't this delightful!" cried Miss Broad.

"It doesn't seem too late to wish you a Merry Christmas when you are coming to give my children the postscript to theirs!"

"We're resting merry, Miss Broad," cried Nan, clearing the jump to the sidewalk and kissing Miss Broad lovingly. "Don't you know? Mumsy—mother says the carol means 'God keep you merry, gentlemen,' so we're resting merry over the next day!"

"Come in, everybody; we're all agog for you within!" cried Miss Broad, receiving Mrs. Brett with a handclasp and a smile that told that these two recognized each other as of one kind.

Wraps—though they were many—were discarded rapidly, and Ailsa seated herself at the piano. The children regarded her and Nan with round eyes of fervent admiration. Their little faces were shining from their mothers' efforts and were so solemn, that it was evident they had no idea what to expect from an entertainment.

Dins softly tuned his violin, Ham got out his cornet and tried it, with the result that the children relaxed a little. Nothing that was akin to a band could be bad, they seemed to feel! Gid's concertina produced a cheerful effect and when little Jim brought forth something from his pocket that looked like nothing they had ever seen but a potato, and began to blow soft notes out of it, a ripple of laughter ran over the room. The kindergartners were beginning to be entertained!

"First, ladies and gentlemen of the Broad Highway to learning," began Dins, who loved

a burlesque speech. "And ladies and—ladies who are guests"—there were no men present—"we will give you the Hit-or-Miss March."

Ailsa struck the opening chord, Dins shouldered his fiddle, Ham put his cornet to his lips, Jimmy his ocarina, and Gid shook out his concertina, and they were off, in a rollicking arrangement of "There's a Girl in Havanna," which was so familiar that it settled the question of the nature of the occasion for the children; they were plainly intended to have fun!

Just as the march was ending a man entered the school room, tall, queer, doubtful! His coat was greenish from the sun, his tie was flamboyant red, long and loose, his collar was a farce in itself, his trousers were too short, strapped down over his boots; they were a strongly marked stripe in design, but they were largely patched with a strong plaid, in such manner that the patch showed, as the old-fashioned coat tails flapped when the man walked.

"Oh, mercy!" exclaimed Miss Broad under her breath, rising, startled, to her feet. But Mrs. Brett touched her arm and said something which made Miss Broad stop and stare at the intruder.

"What do you want here?" demanded Dins, constituting himself spokesman and guardian of the party.

"Let me varm a leetle," said the man in an accent that was not English, nor decidedly anything else.

"If we let you warm yourself what will you

do for us?" demanded Dins, to Nan's horror. She thought that Dins was both impertinent in so thrusting himself forward, and unkind to the man, whose face she could not see, for it was concealed by the wide sombrero which he lacked manners to remove on entering.

"Could I to tootle a leetle?" asked the tramp, producing a disjointed flute from his coat pockets.

Then the girls guessed, they waited eagerly while Dins pretended to consult with Ham and Gid and Miss Broad.

"You may play for us, if you can," Dins announced. Whereupon the man, still hatted and bending forward the better to hide his face, began to play upon his flute bird songs and woodland calls, and that part of the Brett company which had not been in the secret recognized him. For no one but their own "Daddy Brett" could thus imitate bird songs on a flute.

"You're hired!" cried Dins, as the wanderer ended, and kindergarten shouted at this familiar slang. The man doffed his hat and threw it in the corner—and sure enough, it was indeed "Daddy Brett," come to surprise the girls and to take his part in the little Hit-or-Miss orchestra!

Then the performance began in earnest. The Hit-or-Miss Club played its best, the four girls sang, Mrs. Brett played for them, and the four big girls and the three boys and Mr. Brett danced a gavotte, which if not correct as to figures, was wholly satisfactory to the little

audience, though it was impromptu on the spur of the moment.

Then Ailsa danced a solo dance in her crimson chiffon, a dance so pretty that Miss Broad was almost tearfully happy watching it, for she was a child at heart among the little kindergartners.

After this Nan sang, sweet Nan with the wonderful voice that no one could hear unmoved when she sang, as she now did, music as simply beautiful as Brahms' "Cradle Song" and the lovely German "Silent Night."

The little children sat entranced, motionless as mice, till one little fellow, of German blood, piped up in reverent earnestness: "Say, is dat such an anchel's song, what dey wass sinking last night ven ve vere to sleep, my mutter tolt me?"

After that the spell of quiet was broken, but Miss Broad openly wiped her eyes, ignoring the tears on her cheeks as she thanked Nan with a look that was eloquent.

"Master Jamie MacBrett will favor us with the Highland fling!" announced Dins, and he threw a broad plaid sash over his small brother's shoulder, which Nan tied on the side. Ailsa clapped a Glengarry cap on the little boy's head; it lit there rackishly askew, and added to the effect.

Jimmie stepped forward, his face so solemn that nothing could have been less suggestive of a fling of any sort. Ailsa played with a spirit and enjoyment that ought to have enlivened anyone, but Jimmy maintained his gravity. He

went through the steps without a mistake, keeping perfect time and dancing well, but without so much as a flicker of an eyelid, his face so blankly grave, under the rakeish Glengarry, that all the older part of his audience went off into peals of laughter.

The children joined in this laughter with rapturous poundings of their chairs and heel kickings on the floor; the last measures of Ailsa's gay reel were drowned in noise. Jimmy's fling was decidedly the success of the entertainment.

"I always told you I could do it," said Jimmy to Tilly, in gloomy triumph, as he resumed his seat. And this quite finished his older comrades, who held the clue to Jimmy's enthusiastic applause.

Tilly could not resist retorting. "It's only because you looked so killing, in that crazy Scotch cap, and not a smile on you anywhere!" she whispered. "Ailsa, you play the Sailor's Hornpipe now, and I'll show Jim something! He's so conceited!"

Nothing loath Ailsa dashed into the Sailor's Hornpipe, and so did Tilly!

Sticking her thumbs in what would have been her belt, had she one, she fairly leaped forward and began to dance. Not like Jimmy, glum and funereal, but nodding, laughing, waving her long arms, "twinkling," as Gussie said, with her long, long legs, hauling on the ropes and hitching up her waistband, increasing in speed, till Ailsa's fingers flew to accompany her and the applause was tremendous.

"Now, Jimmy Brett, you needn't think you're the only lump of sugar in this bowl!" whispered Tilly, as well as she could manage a whisper, when she returned to her place without her breath.

By this time the kindergarten was in an uproar. No more doubt now in the small pupils' minds as to the nature of this occasion. They did the most extraordinary things by way of venting their delight, pummelled one another, screamed, sang, even cried a little, till Miss Broad saw that it was necessary to cool them off, somehow.

"Children, we are going to sing with this fine band!" she cried. "Play, my dears, play Marching Through Georgia, and Dixie, and we'll gradually get them into sanity. Twins, dear, lead to the piano."

The funny little fat twins, looking for all the world like "the Campbell Twins," obeyed, and all the plump and lean little kindergarteners trooped up, sobered by coming so close to these radiant and gifted older young people.

The babies' singing was funny, for few of the small creatures had any ear for tune and none lacked a shrilly penetrating voice. But it was delightful, nevertheless; the small things were so happy, their voices were so chirping and birdlike, that such a trifle as time and tune did not matter.

"Now, haven't we something for these wonderful visitors?" asked Miss Broad at last.

"Eats!" shouted a boy of four, proud of knowing the answer.

"Where are the four that learned to carry the little round dining room?" asked Miss Broad, and the twins and two others, swelling visibly, stepped out from the ranks.

They followed Miss Broad out of the room. Presently they returned, all of the four bearing together what Miss Broad had christened "the little round dining room."

It was a tray, covered with a shiny napkin and filled with delectable little cakes that must have been hard for their bearers to resist. A maid followed with lemonade and Miss Broad herself with two dishes of simple candies.

"What were we to say?" suggested Miss Broad.

"Thank you. It was fine!" shouted all the small voices stragglingly.

"You taught them to thank us before you knew what we'd do! What a risk to run!" cried Ailsa.

It had not been a brilliant afternoon; nothing great was done, nothing interesting had happened. But every minute of it had been "resting merry," in truth. Why? Ailsa wondered. She wondered a great deal that winter over similar problems.

Miss Broad unconsciously answered her question. Drawing Nan and Ailsa apart from the others she said:

"You've been such dear, kind children to give an afternoon of the holidays to these little

children! You see how happy you made them. If only everybody kept Christmas—and kept it all the year round!—by doing small kindnesses! It is such a happy way to go through life!"

"I was wondering why this was so nice to-day—for us, I mean," said Ailsa.

"It's dear to be among little children who haven't much fun on Christmas," said Nan. "I suppose it is because we feel Bethlehem, even when we aren't exactly thinking about it."

"Dear little Nannie," said Miss Broad. "You understand! I believe I'll tell you, my dears, that you have done more for me than you know, more than for the children."

"I really enjoyed this afternoon, and yet this morning I heard that almost all I had in the world was lost and I was feeling sad."

"Lost! Miss Amabel!" gasped Nan.

"You mean money?" said Ailsa, shocked.

"Money, my own home, everything, if the first report is true," returned Miss Broad. "I couldn't have made the children happy to-day, but now I see that, whatever has happened, there will be a great many happy days left to me."

"What will you do?" cried Ailsa. Nan's arms were around Miss Broad's neck, but the others were looking toward them and Miss Broad unclasped them gently, turning from the girls with a smile that showed no trace of being forced.

"Live right here with my babies, from necessity, just as cheerfully as I lived here from

choice, dear girls," she said. "I'm coming to see, what I always knew, that one can do with very little—provided he has a good deal, a good deal of the best things. I've had a merry afternoon, and indeed I'm grateful to you! Let me do something for you one of these fine days, chickabiddies! And don't look so frightened and white, dearies! Indeed I shall be content. Don't you know you told me it was: 'God rest you merry, gentlemen?" I'll be kept merry; never fear!"

She smiled brightly, but the girls could not smile back again. All this afternoon, and not a cloud on the serene, thin, angular, plain, yet beautiful face!

"Surely there are great things and great people in the world," thought Ailsa, "people whose splendor shone from within." Silent, thoughtful, grave, yet with a glimmering perception of having had a glimpse of a mountain height, Ailsa and Nan rode home in the straw from the long-projected concert.

Chapter XI

DRAMATICS

"'All the world's a stage,'" Ailsa casually quoted, forgetting the ink on her finger and branding herself with it by wiping it on her forehead when she pushed the hair out of her eyes.

"'And men and women merely players,'" Nan capped her quotation.

"You have to make it *measly* players, likely, when it's boys and girls," suggested Dins.

"The players will be all right, if ever we can get a play," said Ailsa. "I'd no idea it would be so hard! It wouldn't be, either, if it was only getting a plot and writing the play. But we've got to find the plot and write the play, give everybody a part to suit each taste and then fit in clothes and things! Kit and I are nearly crazy. Tilly has to be in it, and if we don't give her a funny part, something she has to tear around in, she'll simply be wasted. Then Kit has made the job worse by setting her heart on a frilly apron to wear. I told her she'd got to think up her own part. I can't write for ruffles!"

"Sounds like sending an order to a dry goods store," said Dins. "Poor little Auntie! I'm glad I'm not clever. Say, I can't keep from thinking about Miss Broad."

"Oh, neither can I!" cried Ailsa, throwing

down her pen as a visible expression of the preponderance of this interest over the play. "But don't you think Gus will be able to do anything?"

"Father? I didn't know he thought he could: what is it? I haven't heard," said Dins.

"Oh, haven't you?" said Ailsa. "He went to see Miss Broad and made her tell him all about it. There's somebody she has trusted and he is not honest. Your father says he has invested badly, apparently, but he suspects he has really taken that dear, lovely Miss Broad's money himself! Gus says he is going to try his best to make him restore part of it, at least."

"Wish him luck!" exclaimed Dins fervently. "You know that's just like Mr. Augustus! He doesn't make a fuss about it, but he quietly pitches in when he sees anyone in need of being fought for; he does loads of things for other people in a sort of a just-happened-to-be-here-so thought-I'd-drop-in way! I don't suppose you can be a knight errant in mixed cloth business suits and clawhammers, going to business every day, but if you could, that's what Sir Augustus Brett would be."

"Good for you, Dins!" cried Ailsa enthusiastically. "I'm awfully glad you can warm up like that about your own father! Of course you can be a knight errant in a serge suit, just as well as you can in armor. I could better!" and Ailsa, characteristically, giggled, though she was thoroughly in earnest.

"Father will help Miss Broad if anyone can,"

said Nan with conviction. "We went to see her, Dins; did you know it?"

"No; when?" asked Dins.

"Yesterday, mother, Ailsa and I," Nan continued. "She's perfectly wonderful! She's planning to give up her own beautiful home as cheerfully as if it were to go to Mount Desert next summer. It isn't as though there were anyone but myself," she told mumsy. If these little kindergarteners were my own children it would be another matter: I might be sorry to have less for them. But one elderly person can end her days in one place as well as another. I spent my winters here among the children; why not live here altogether? I felt rather sad at first, but I'm getting reconciled to it now. Is it quite right, Mary, to grumble when one has enough to keep warm and fed; so many are miserable?" she asked mumsy."

"I suppose if it comes to taking it like a saint!" said Dins, with a shake of the head that completed his unfinished sentence, plainly declaring that human nature rested on an earthly level more often than it soared.

"Dins, she takes it precisely that way!" said Nan softly. "When mumsy suggested that the house where she has the school was dreadfully tiny, in a poor neighborhood, among humble, uncongenial people, that blessed woman said, as simply as if we all practised just what we preached and are taught: 'I've no doubt it is decidedly larger and better than the house in Nazareth, Mary, and not only the neighbors,

but the inmates of that house were humble working people.' You couldn't say a thing after that! Mumsy didn't try to; she just kissed Miss Broad and said: 'Let me and my children come occasionally to learn of you in this little house, Miss Amabel.' I'll tell you the truth, Dins; Ailsa and I just cried right out loud!"

Dins whistled a brief strain, then he said—and he had not yet whistled his voice into perfect steadiness: "She's great all right!"

Privately he was hastily considering the ways in which he might possibly make himself useful to Miss Broad for the rest of the winter.

The girls smiled at each other with understanding of the boy's shortage in adjectives, in self-expression in anywise, as Dins strolled out of the room.

"It's good for him," said Nan, nodding maternally, not making clear that she meant "good for him to hear of Miss Broad's courage and goodness," but Ailsa understood.

"It's good for all of us," she said. "Nan, for pity's sake, are Kitty and I writing a play or are we not?"

"I don't know what Kit is doing this moment, but I couldn't truthfully say you were," said Nan. "It's too bad, Ailie; we might give it up."

Ailsa snatched up the discarded pen and pad; the suggestion of abandoning the play inspired her, as far as that, to new effort.

"Give it up! No, indeed!" she cried. Then she added in a drooping voice: "I don't have to give it up; it has given me up."

Nan laughed, but looked sympathetic.

"Haven't you thought of the plot?" she asked.

"No, I haven't," said Ailsa. "Neither has Kit. We tried together—no use! So we agreed to try separately—still no use! I feel as though I might work—write the dialogue—if I knew what it would be about."

"I was thinking," began Nan slowly, and Ailsa looked up with a ray of hope. "I think you ought to be a gypsy—I mean a white child—Why, gypsies are white people! I wonder what is the word for people, opposite to gypsy? Anyway, you know what I mean! A girl that had been stolen by gypsies in babyhood. Your mother would be dead, mother and father, and you would be the heir to a fortune—of course, because no child stolen by gypsies ever is anything else."

"I would be a noble countess, or duchess—duchess! It's just as easy to make it the biggest! Maybe a princess! Go on, Nannie!" cried Ailsa, who was drinking in these developments thirstily, at once seeing that anything like a gypsy part would suit her. With that thought, however, came another one.

"Nannie, wait a minute! Why should I look so much like a gypsy—that's why you say I'm to take that girl part of course—when I'm really not one?"

"Caught it from long residence with the tribe," explained Nan promptly. "Mona can be the devoted sister who finds you, and Kit can

be the wicked woman who has stolen your title. I'll be a queen who has to restore it to you—that won't give me much acting—and Tilly might be the gypsy woman, raging and raving because she had to lose you—she'd be half funny and half good in that! And the boys—Oh me; what shall the boys be?"

"Dins must be the hero, the man I marry, because he's the best looking and most dashing," cried Ailsa, erect by this time and her eyes "going in and out" Nan thought. "He can help to find the stolen girl, out of family friendship, and when he finds her he must fall in love with her at sight. Ham and Gid—I don't know! I suppose one can be an assistant villain, and one had better be the gypsy's husband." "And Jimmy? You've got to put Jimmy in, if you do, Tilly," said Nan.

"Jimmy ought to be a priest, he's so solemn? Oh, Nan, I know! A big wedding tableau at the end and Jimmy marrying us!" cried Ailsa.

"He wouldn't," said Nan decidedly. "I know James! He'd rather be something tragic, like the one who kills the villian, to rescue you."

"Fine!" cried Ailsa, by this time in a white flame of enthusiasm. "Nan, I didn't think you had it in you! Jimmy can be the faithful retainer of the noble family and he can stab the villian in the dark, after the girl is found and the villian is creeping in to slay her and so keep the title for his wife. Oh, mercy, I never thought! How can Kit wear her apron as the villianess? You can't be a villainess with a stolen title and

wear a little dinky apron! That apron wouldn't go in this play, anywhere."

"Then Kit must give up the apron," said Nan decidedly. "It is silly to try to get in everybody and then all their clothes, beside. I think that could be a pretty decent play—if we could act it."

"If we could *write* it and act it," amended Ailsa. "I think it would be and we'll go hunt up the others and ask them what they think of it. Of course our idea was to have a play more like everyday life." Ailsa's first enthusiasm suffered a slight diminution.

"Everyday life is harder to write and act," said Nan, revealing unexpected critical perceptions. "That has to be quiet and nice-mannered and, at the same time, interesting. It would be hard for us to do. And anything funny you simply can't do, unless you make it a minstrel show. I think something not likely, and with grand and elegant stagey costumes, is easier, and surer to be some good."

"Nan, what a sensible thing you are! Why haven't you said a word before? You've all but planned the whole thing!" cried Ailsa, getting up to go at once to confer with her fellow author and actors.

"I was thinking about it, and the play seemed somewhere around, but I couldn't catch it till you looked up a while ago and you looked so gypsified that it came to me in a flash," said Nan, not a little gratified to find herself also a collaborator.

"You know that's the thing that bothers me," said Ailsa, pausing in the doorway. "Why should I, when I'm merely stolen by the—Why, Nan! I see now! Just switch the parts around! One of you others be the heroine and I'll be a real gypsy!"

"You must be the heroine," said Nan firmly. "I won't and can't, and Mona and Kit can't, whether they will or won't. You can be and must be."

"Nan, I'll leave it to you: How will it look for us to plan the play, and I do most of the writing, and still give me the best part?"

"Make the other parts better than the heroine's, if you want to, but you must be that noble stolen-found lady," declared Nan.

Nan's play was accepted with enthusiasm, greater that it had begun to look as though there might not be a play of any sort, Kitty's inventive powers having proved as refractory as Ailsa's. She and Ailsa set to work at once to write it. They began with a plan for five acts, but they cut them down to three, which dropped into two when they encountered the difficulty of scenic settings, as Kit firmly insisted on giving each act a new scene. A forest for the gypsies and a palace for the nobility strained their resources severely, so the play was finally divided into but two acts. Dialogue writing, also, proved unexpectedly difficult, especially that the two playwrights wrote in distinctly different styles, with opposite conception of aims. When the collaborators were

discouraged and so tired that the air was full of the danger of "a fuss", Jimmy sensibly solved the difficulty.

"Don't write the play," he advised. "Let's talk it, make it up as we go along. It'll go better and be easier."

"The kid has hit it!" cried Dins. "We'll begin to rehearse and talk our play and we'll take notes of what we say, so we'll be able to do the same things again, and after a try or two we'll have a play talked instead of written. It'll be more limber and have more snap in it. We'll begin right off."

From that time "The Romany Duchess"—Dins had named the play and everybody felt that nothing in it could be expected to reach up to the perfection of its name—was a source of boundless pleasure and it went on in leaps and strides to its end. The only difficulty was to keep the dialogue from increasing. It was a great temptation to the author-actors to add new pathos, tragedy, or wit to its lines, having "got the hang," as Gid put it, of constructing lines. The management, Dins, Ailsa, Kit and Nan, had to forbid the slightest further addition to the text, or the play would have gone on growing till it would have had to have been given on successive nights, like the Niebelunlied Lied, Wagner's "Ring" operas.

When the text of the play was finally made up all the actors wrote down their lines and they had the play type written in order that Mrs. Brett should have a prompt book. She was

to be the prompter on the great night, for though everybody was letter perfect at rehearsals—as they should be, considering that they were all joint authors—it would not do to risk the effect of excitement on the memory when the play was given. Indeed, the joint authorship made it harder to remember, because there had been so much adding to and taking out of lines while the play was growing that almost every speech in it might have been something else.

"We could prompt one another," said Mona dubiously when they were discussing the expense of having the play type written. "We know one another's parts."

"Too risky," said Ailsa decidedly. "Each of us would keep still, thinking someone else was going to prompt. Besides, Molly-Mary Brett has to be in this play somehow; there's no fun in anything that leaves her out."

"What I want to know," cried Kit, "is what we're giving this play for."

"For fun," said Dins promptly.

"Of course; but we've got to have an object, a charity or something, if we want to sell tickets, and there's no fun in inviting people to see it; you've got to sell tickets to make it interesting," Kit persisted.

"To whom, actors or audience?" inquired Nan. "But you're right, Kitty Machree; an object and tickets sold for it would make the whole thing fine and real thingish."

"I have it! I know!" cried Ailsa springing to her feet, upsetting Middy from the cushion

beside her and starting Peggy to bark wildly by the lively dance she executed. "We'll ask Miss Broad."

"To come?" inquired Mona at sea as to Ailsa's meaning.

"No—that, too, maybe. I mean we'll ask Miss Broad what to use the money for. She is sure to know lots of good objects. And, girls, maybe she could give the money for us; she'll have to stop being charitably extravagant now, and maybe she'd like to have some money to use for some pet object," cried Ailsa, her idea expanding.

"We went to Miss Broad's kindergarten to give our silly Christmas circus when we couldn't think of anywhere to offer it. Are we going to use Miss Broad as a sort of fire escape? It's a little sneaky to pretend to be charitable, when all we care about is the racket," said Dins.

"We don't mind if somebody gets something good out of it," remarked Tilly, so seriously that the older ones laughed, and Nan said, replying to the question wrapped up in Dins' speech:

"We couldn't have a safer fire escape, if we did use Miss Broad for one. I don't believe it's any harm for us to care most about the fun of the thing; it's so natural when you're young. Maybe, by and by, we'll grow up far enough to think first of doing good."

"And, as Tilly says, We don't mind doing it now," laughed Ailsa. "If we're to consult Miss Broad why not go right away? We ought to

get our tickets ready and give the play as soon as we can. We are ready, and if we keep on rehearsing it we'll get so sick of it all the decent acting will ooze right out of it."

"Who'll go?" asked Mona, looking suggestively at Dins.

"Ladies first," said Dins, with a bow. "You girls attend to it. You're better at finding ways to spend money than boys ever are."

"My goodness, it would take tons of candy and tanks of soda water and mountains of chewing gum to equal one motor bicycle!" cried Kit with spirit; she considered her weakness for these luxuries attacked, so came back at Dins' present greatest earthly desire.

"Who said anything about soda, or candy, or gum? Sheathe your claws, Kitty! By the way, what's the matter with using the proceeds of the play to buy a motor cycle for a deserving youth, who never has held a job in his life? asked Dins.

"I wish we could divide them up for whatever we each want," said Mona candidly, running after the other girls, who were already half way up stairs to prepare to go in search of Miss Broad.

At their own corner Mona and Kit dropped out of the deputation.

"We don't know Miss Broad as well as Nan does, and there are too many, anyway. You go on. Nannie and Ailie, and tell us what she says to-night when we come to your house to write up the tickets. We can do it to-night, if Miss Broad tells you what to say the money is

for," said Mona, looking admiringly at Ailsa's becoming hat. "I do think, Ailsa Brett, you're the dearest thing in that hat!"

"Run along, little girl; you're dropping your taffy!" cried Ailsa, who refused to take seriously Mona's inclination to "gush" at times.

Ailsa and Nan found Miss Broad a little changed. It was not possible for the loss that had befallen her to leave her quite unmoved. The strong face that was beautiful in its plainness, looked thinner, with shadows under the eyes, and a deeper look of patience around the lips. But those eyes were calm and clear as ever, with the light in them undimmed and the firm, warm mouth smiled as cheerfully at the girls when they came up the steps and Miss Broad hastened to admit them herself, as if such trifles as impoverishment did not exist.

"An object for which to raise money, my dears?" Miss Broad cried, with her whimsical smile. "Such an easy thing to suggest many; such a difficult thing to select one! What queer little mortals you are! Not satisfied to go on and have a good time for its own sake, and entirely justifiably, but trying to spin your top on a monument, so to illustrate! This is the second time you've come to me for an excuse to have a merrymaking!"

"No, not exactly an excuse for a merrymaking, but an excuse for tickets to it, Miss Broad," said Nan earnestly. "You can't sell tickets just to sell them; they must be for something, and its a thousand times more fun to have

tickets to a play. So isn't there a charity you can suggest?"

"No end of them, Nanette!" declared Miss Broad. "Why not make a fund for the baby?"

"What baby, Miss Broad?" asked Nan.

"Don't you know about her? I thought your father would have told you. The tiny girl, six weeks old, whose father was killed on the railroad before she was born and whose girl-mother died when she was a day old. I meant to adopt—. We are trying to raise a fund for her, enough to keep her out of an asylum," said Miss Broad, checking herself, but not till the word "adopt" had told Ailsa and Nan that Miss Broad's change of fortune had deprived this baby of an ideal adopted mother.

"Poor little mite!" cried Nan, as Ailsa said, "There couldn't be a dearer object for youngsters like us to work for! We'll do it, Miss Broad. I wonder if we might ask fifty cents for the tickets? We wouldn't have dared, but as long as it's to be for the baby—We might go from house to house with the tickets ourselves, Nan, and tell everybody about the poor tot. What do you think?"

"I think so," said Nan, not too lucidly. "Thank you lots and lots, Miss Broad. I knew you'd know something for us to do! I wish after the play was over we could do something for that baby! Could we see her? And could we—I don't know what! Form a society and sew for her? Do something, anyway?"

"Bless your little heart, Nannie, of course

you could! We'll organize the Joint Guardians, or some such titled society, and you shall have a share in the solitary petal. A baby left alone like this always makes me think of one tiny severed petal, floating at the mercy of the waves on the surface of a stream, doesn't it you?" asked Miss Broad.

"It never has, but it always will after this," said loving Nan, with quick tears of sympathy in her eyes, as she kissed Miss Broad. "If father can—do what he wants to, maybe the little baby won't need us."

Miss Broad shook her head at Nan. "Don't suggest hopes, Nan. I had so meant and wanted to look after the little thing! But I hope to look after her, though I cannot support her. Ah, well! We never can see with our bodily eyes the pattern side of the tapestry which our lives are weaving; we never know why, but we know there is a why."

Ailsa walked on in a profound study for a block after they had left Miss Broad. Then she looked up. "Nan, she said energetically, "if I have enough left when I get things straightened up, I believe I'll support that baby myself!"

"You!" cried Nan with pardonable amazement. "If you'd been the maiden aunt we thought you, you might have, but a snip of a girl like you! And what do you mean by your having enough left? Your mother's money isn't yours, Ailie. And what are you going to straighten up?"

"Such a lot of questions! They sound like an air gun. And I'm not going to answer one of them, my dear little niece, because they're all part of one secret—and I don't know it myself yet, not surely! Some day you'll know," said Ailsa mysteriously.

"Now you're behaving like a maiden aunt. Run away, child, and play; you'll know when you're grown up!" cried Nan, with half real, half feigned impatience.

That night the authors and actors of "The Romany Duchess" waived the usual nightly rehearsal and bent their minds and hands to the making of tickets, for now that the play not only had an object in giving, but an object that seized the hearts of these young folk and filled them with a burning desire to save the baby from an asylum, it was highly important to economize on printing.

"The Romany Duchess," headed each ticket in large letters, brushed in with Indian ink. "An Original Play, Written and Acted by the Brett Dramatic Association. For the Benefit of a Homeless Orphan Baby. 50 Cents," followed, written plainly, but without unnecessary elaboration. A hundred tickets were prepared, and the Brett Dramatic Association found its task all that it wanted to do before it was done.

The next day all the dramatic company set out to canvas Renwyck with the tickets.

Nobody to whom they went refused to buy; most people bought two. At night the hundred

tickets were all gone and those who asked had been assured that on the great night—now but four days distant—admittance without tickets might be effected if they paid at the door. It really looked as though the play was to be a financial success. Already fifty dollars were in hand for the baby.

Ailsa was fired with enthusiasm, fear and resolution. "If they all buy like this, even if it is because they know Gus and Molly-Mary, or are interested in the baby, we've simply got to act like—like Siddonses!"

"What are Siddonses, Ailsa?" asked Jimmy, mistaking it for a common noun.

"Mrs. Siddons was a very great English actress who lived ever so long ago, when Doctor Johnson was living, and Sir Joshua Reynolds; he painted her portrait," said Ailsa.

"I'd rather act like some man," said serious Jimmy ,more than ever serious.

"If you're gong to play your own part, and fight the gypsy man and rescue me, you'd better," laughed Ailsa. "Mercy, Nan, I'm positively choking when I think of it!"

"I'm not choking, because my throat gets so nervous tight it won't even choke," returned Nan.

So with the greatest trepidation, yet with consuming impatience, the members of the Brett Dramatic Association awaited the presentation of "The Romany Duchess."

Chapter XII

"THE ROMANY DUCHESS"

Renwyck was interested in the success of the play beyond merely buying tickets for it, generously as it did that. When the boys of the Brett Dramatic Association went to the lumber yard to see how cheap boards could be had to put a raised flooring for the stage at the end of the long Brett house parlor, Mr. Abner Coolbaugh, the proprietor of the yard, offered to lend lumber for this purpose.

"I guess I can use such lengths over and over again; folks is always looking for boards about twenty feet long—you said the room was twenty foot wide? The'd come in good for 'most any porch flooring, and I guess your footprints ain't going to mar 'em much. I'll send around enough that length, ploughed and grooved boards, to make a stage the width you say and a man along to help put it in. Then I'll send after 'em to rip 'em up and haul 'em back here the next day. They'll be as good as ever," he said.

"We'll be more obliged to you than I can tell you, Mr. Coolbaugh," said Dins. "You see we aren't going to ask any of our families to help us out with the expenses of the play, so the lower we keep them the more money there'll be to hand over for the support of the child we're—

we're going to hand it over for," Dins ended lamely.

"Well, that was the way I wa looking at it," agreed Mr. Coolbaugh. "I'll use the boards again, fast enough, but if there is any odd feet wasted fitting 'em somewhere afterward, I'll just set 'em down, with my man's time and the team's hauling, to the account of the widows and orphans, though this baby's far and away from the widow age, 's I take it. Girl, ain't it?"

"Yes, so she may be a widow some day. Her mother was widowed; her father was killed on the railroad," said Dins. "It's mighty nice of you, Mr. Coolbaugh."

"You're welcome," replied Mr. Coolbaugh, with indirect appropriateness. "I'll just set the loan of boards down in the ledger I keep in my mind as: "Planks for rescuing one orphan baby from the asylum."

The next day the stage was set up, Mr. Coolbaugh's man directing the work which the boys eagerly performed, while the girls blissfully looked on, finding the scent of pine deliciously intoxicating when it arose from the flooring of their own stage, upon which they were to act their own play.

"First we built the play and now the stage is built. It was something like driving in first one nail and then another to talk the play into shape the way we did," said Ailsa later, when she and Nan were on their knees brushing up shavings after the carpenter had gone.

"If only we hit the nail on the head when we give the play!" sighed Nan.

"Is there anyone on earth but Molly-Mary who would give up her best carpet to a stage over it and not care a speck?" asked Ailsa, lying flat to pull out a shaving that had withdrawn half way under the stage.

"She's a nice little lump of sweetness and mumsiness, as we've often decided, but pine shavings and sawdust won't harm a carpet," said Nan, pulling herself to her feet.

"Come on now; that's good enough. We have to sweep thoroughly after the stage is taken down. We ought to hurry on with the scenery."

"The scenery" had a fine, professional sound, but the truth was that it was hardly professional scenery. The forest for the gypsy scenes was indicated, rather than portrayed by deep folds of green cheesecloth, its color carefully dyed by Mona's mother, who had obligingly offered to take it off the hands of the Brett Dramatic Association after the play, to use as curtains in her summer cottage. Potted plants—not too many, for the stage space was not unlimited, arranged with elaborate carelessness to get the best effect with the least danger of tripping over them, further indicated to the audience that this was a care-free woods, where the gypsies lived their unrestrained lives of merry fortune telling, mingled with child-stealing to which latter industry they owed the possession of the beautiful Romany Duchess—Ailsa.

The palace to which the duchess was later to

return, under the protection of her sovereign, the queen, was not less simple than the forest. The Dramatic Association's first ambition to set the palace with "more than oriental splendor" yielded to the limitations of space. They compromised on a throne regal in wine colored canton flannel hangings and genuine, handmade white canton flannel ermine, a statue or two, a few good rugs and three of the most palatial, yet not wide-spreading, chairs that the residences of the actors could provide. Scene shifting was thus simplified and expedited and the effect seen from the audience, represented at the final rehearsal by Mr. Brett and Mrs. Brett, the prompter, was pronounced wonderfully good.

The night of the play dawned—it was a brilliant, full-moon night so it is almost correct to say that it "dawned"—and the audience crowded the front room, which the actors called "the orchestra;" the stage was set on the other side of the folding doors, in the rear of the long double parlors.

The whispering behind the curtain increased as actor after actor made ready and came from the dressing room to peep through a hole which Tilly, with admirable forethought, had made in the curtain for peeping purposes. Every seat was taken, people were standing around the walls, grouped in the doorway. There were more present than had bought tickets; the inquiries as to admittance by payment at the doors had not been idle curiosity.

The actors were so excited that Mrs. Brett's office of prompter bade fair to be no sinecure. Ailsa trembled so that it was with difficulty that she controlled her hands to play the overture. In their costumes behind the scenes the members of the Dramatic Association, who were also members of the Hit-or-Miss Club, augmented by Mr. Brett's flute, played the overture with praise-worthy spirit, considering their over-wrought nerves.

The overture ended with a great burst of sound, completely drowned, however, by the applause of the audience.

The orchestra—or Mr. Brett and Gid—flew to their posts on either side of the curtain, which rolled up with some hitches, but with fewer on the whole, than is usual to curtains serving amateur performances.

Mona, the devoted sister of the lost duchess, was discovered sitting at her embroidery before the throne, upon which Nan, the queen, reclined in regal indifference, as well as in regal magnificence of robes, while Kit, the usurping duchess, read aloud from a highly decorative volume of poetry, bound in red velvet with a design of fleur de lis applied on the cover by Mrs. Brett, who had been the chief costumer and property man of the play. It was cut from cretonne and so nicely pasted on the velvet that even opera glasses, which no one used in this private theatre, would have revealed that it was not embossed.

Just how Kit, and not the duchess' sister, had

come by the lost duchess' title was not made clear, but somehow she had usurped it. She was arrogant in her manner in order to live up to her title, and to her position as first court lady to Queen Madrella, whose name was the proud invention of Tilly, who insisted upon its use. Kit was gorgeous in crimson robes with much gold decoration; they more than compensated for the apron of which she had been deprived. Pretty Nan was really a lovely majesty in her flowing white, with jewels galore, strung in chains and glistening from the square yoke of her gown, falling from her wrists and sparkling in her hair. It is amazing how beads and tinsel can glitter when they are judiciously applied!

Mona wore violet and green to harmonize with her melancholy in the loss of her noble sister. It was cotton crepon, but it looked like anything dignified and mediæval.

As the curtain rose Mona stirred and sighed and Kit, frowning on her haughtily, laid down her book, as the queen asked gently: "Why dost thou sigh, sweet Lady Leila?" This was the cue for Mona to relate the events which had preceded the opening of the play, the loss of her sister and her ceaseless mourning for her, upon which the plot turned.

The Duchess Malora—her name was Ailsa's construction, and she prided herself upon it, as its syllables meant "evil prayer" she insisted—the Duchess Malora, present incumbent of the lost duchess' estates, moved uneasily and

scowled frightfully during this recitation, to indicate her wrathful dread of discovery.

"Does not this story irk your majesty?" she inquired pointedly, as Lady Leila ended. "We have heard it often and it is as stale as the song of a stuffed bird."

This speech was Dins' contribution to the dialogue and he, at least, admired it.

"Not so," replied the gentle Queen Madrella. "Though we appreciate thy devotion to our person, Lady Malora, yet are we grieved that she who had been Duchess of Dorramanca, had she not been lost and left the title to thee who now graces it, has so disappeared in her childhood, leaving our well-beloved Lady Leila with a life-long sorrow."

This somewhat cloudy speech moved the Lady Leila to tears. "Oh," she cried, "my liege and sovereign lady, thy royal sympathy is as balm to my tear-worn eyes. Complete thy clemency! Grant me thy royal consent to go in search of my dearest sister, for whom I have grieved these twenty years. Though she was but three years old when she disappeared, yet something tells me that I should know her were I to come upon her. I was but twice a twelvemonth her senior, yet well do I remember the strange mark upon her soft left arm, high toward her dimpling shoulder, where it would not disfigure her. Her father, my step-father, the noble Duke of Dorramanca, for she is not my sister in full kin, though to the fullest in love, caused her to be tattoed in babyhood. He was mirthful, and

well do I remember the humor of that day, when he said: 'A peach art thou, little Lady Graciella, and as good peaches are brandied, so shalt thou be branded.' He caused her to be marked with the design of a lily, for she was the lily of the noble house of Dorramanca." Mona hurried this speech slightly; it was Ham's witticism and the girls did not like it, feeling that slangy puns were not in keeping with ducal dignity. "Let me, oh my Queen, depart in quest of my sister, the Lady Graciella." Mona arose and threw herself at Queen Madrella's feet, taking sly care that her own feet should be gracefully covered with her train, as she knelt with her back toward the audience.

The queen bent forward and raised her court lady with a kiss upon her cheek.

"Go, sweet Lady Leila," she said. "Thou hast our consent, our blessing and our hopes, though our obligation to speak the truth compels that we tell thee that our hope is slender. The Lady Graciella must long since be dead."

"Say not so," sobbed the Lady Leila. "I thank your majesty. There is a faithful retainer of our house, Jasper Truestaff is his name, with whom and with the noble Lord Hugh, Earl of Beldevote, I will at once set out upon my quest. Fare thee well, dear and gracious queen! Lady Malora, I take my leave of thee. Am I successful thou wilt no longer wear the diadem of Dorramanca."

" 'Tis a fool's errand and one that likes thee well, Lady Leila," said Lady Malora, with a

scornful toss of her head as she turned on her heel, glaring vengefully at space. With this the first act ended and the curtain fell amid thundering plaudits from the audience. They forced the three ladies before the curtain, hand in hand, to acknowledge the applause.

Act second, discovered by the rising curtain, represented the forest. A gypsy camp-fire, shown by faggots and a suspended kettle and by the frequent poking of invisible flames, burned—according to any worth-while imagination—in the middle of the stage. Around it sat Lara, the gypsy wife (Tilly) attired in gorgeous motley, with a Roman blanket's gay stripes to top it all off as a shawl around her shoulders, and another Roman blanket thrown upon the ground, upon which she reclined. Tilly was unutterably happy; in all her life she had never before been so prominent or so magnificent. Opposite to her lay on his elbow Gid, as the gypsy husband, his race and moral standing plainly revealed by velveteen breeches, a red shirt, a sash and a black mustache. The mustache was so strongly inclined to leave him that he had to stroke it constantly and keep it in mind to an extent that interfered with his acting.

On the third side of the fire sat Ailsa as the abducted duchess, known in the tribe as Joyous. Ailsa was tropically lovely in red and gold, with abundant gilt coins dangling from the crimson turban that sat on her flowing dark hair; more coins tinkled from her black velvet bolero

jacket above her bright yellow skirt, red sash and white silk shirt.

There was a new quality in the applause that greeted this pretty tableau; it was not only kindly, it was sincere. Ailsa sprang up, ran around the fire, threw her arms above her head with a pretty, free gesture and tripped to the front of the stage.

"I hear a bird!" she cried, bending forward to listen under her masses of dark hair. Mr. Brett's flute trilled and piped, as birdlike as he could make it.

"Sing, sweet bird, and I will dance to you," cried the little gypsy. Forthwith the flute broke into a pretty little woodland air and Ailsa danced, danced like a gypsy, or a little dark elf, as if she were, indeed, alone in the forest.

The applause that she won would take no denial of a repetition of the dance. After it was given, Ailsa sank down into her place beside the piled up faggots, breathless and glowing, to the delicious music of applause as hearty as the first round. But now it died away as Mona, or Lady Leila appeared in the background, a cloak over her shoulders, accompanied by the Earl of Beldevote, in private life Dinsmore Brett, in the most impressive of pale blue slashed doublets and garnet cloak, with a plumed cap that could have belonged to no one lower than a noble earl. As the Lady Leila and the earl peered through the trees, in truthful language through a fern and a rubber plant, disposed apart at a space adapted to peering, there was espied be-

hind them the sober face of Jasper Truestaff, or Jimmy, clad in plain brown, to announce his sobriety and reliability among these court folk.

"Hist!" observed the earl. Whereupon the gypsy wife, Lara, sprang to her feet, and, carefully looking in the wrong direction said:

"Tony, I feel the presence of an enemy!"

"He'd be a bold man who dared approach our camp; I'd drink his blood!" exclaimed Tony, also rising and behaving and speaking in a way that could not by any stretch be called hospitable.

"Drink, then," said the earl, stepping forth lightly, with a gesture of airy contempt, as he took his stand in the middle of the stage, hand on hip, the other holding back his cloak, with the double intention of being ready for the gypsy's attack and better displaying his beautiful costume.

"Hah! art thou my enemy?" demanded the gypsy.

"As it likes you," laughed the earl. "I am the Earl of Beldevote, the friend of all honest men, and, mark me, my man, that suits you not, if appearances speak truth!"

"Have at you!" cried the gypsy, raising his cudgel.

"With all my heart!" cried the noble lord, drawing a sword that seemed slightly unfamiliar to his hands.

"Oh, oh!" shrieked Joyous, the gypsy girl, pulling off her bolero in her emotion and covering her face with her hands in terror.

"My sister, oh, my little sister!" screamed the Lady Leila, rushing forth from the shadow of the forest trees—in pots—as Joyous' bare arms flashed aloft.

The Lady Leila seized the slight figure of the gypsy girl, with less surprise and enthusiasm than might have been expected, since she could not possibly have known her search for her sister was to end here. Joyous fought her off with fine dramatic effect, crying:

"Unhand me, lady! Who are you? What mean you by calling the poor gypsy Joyous your sister? I see plainly that you are noble, while I, who have no sister in the first place, am but a wandering gypsy."

"On your shoulder, child, you bear the proof," returned Lady Leila, trying to master her emotion. "You are the rightful Duchess of Dorramanca, Graciella, my little half sister. Your father, the Duke, caused you to be tattooed on your shoulder with a lily. I, who had set out to find you after twenty years of absence, saw and recognized the mark when you raised your arms. Graciella, my sister, my lost darling, embrace me!"

Joyous needed no further argument. With a melodramatic shriek that made the Lady Leila's slight perturbation seem calmer than ever, she threw herself headlong at her sister and fell, half fainting, on her shoulder, while the Earl of Beldevote and the gypsy Tony, postponed their quarrel to watch this reunion.

Lara began to shriek wildly. "I am dis-

covered! My sin has found me out! I thought after so many years that I was safe!" she cried. "I stole the little Duchess Graciella on her third birthday, but I have kept her safe and loved her as my own. And now, when I thought all danger past, I am undone!" Whereupon she began to shriek with manifest enjoyment of her own shrillness.

"Say let up, Till-Pill: tone 'em down," murmured the earl of Beldevote, *sotto-voce*.

Then aloud, he said: "Calm yourself, woman. We will take you to our noble queen where justice shall be done you. If you can prove that any other motive but crime inspired the theft, in consideration of the care we can see you have given this lovely lady, the rightful Duchess Graciella, whom you call Joyous, mayhap you will be forgiven. Now will we away."

"Not much will we!" declared Tony. "If you want Joyous you must fight for her; you'll not take her else."

"Say you so?" cried Jasper Truestaff, suddenly springing out from the tree where he had been hiding and hurling himself at Tony. "Leave the fight to me, good my lord," he said to the earl. "Do you protect the women and hold fast to the Lady Graciella." Whereupon began between the faithful retainer of the House of Dorramanca and the gypsy a fight of the most furious sort, witnessed by the frightened ladies and the gypsy Lara, who screamed like a hawk and encouraged her husband, while Lady Leila and Lady Graciella, or Joyous, clung each to

an arm of the earl, who placed himself with drawn sword, in advance of them.

The gypsy Tony was a head taller and considerably larger than Jasper Truestaff, yet from the first it was plain that the little man's strength was the greater "thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just." There never was a moment when the result of this combat, furious though it was, could have been questioned. And when at last Tony fell, and, with a thrust, carefully and deliberately aimed at a spot in his side, just below where Tony's left hand lay, Jasper shed his blood in a red stream over the forest sod, the audience felt that it was no more than they expected, nor less than he deserved.

The applause was extravagant, but it had to cease when Lara threw herself upon her slain husband's corpse, and waited for silence in which to declare that she would perish with him, and thereupon died in the most sudden manner, with entire abandon to the act and a fearful stiffening of her four out-stretched and lengthy limbs.

"They are punished," said the earl gravely, doffing his plumed hat and gazing solemnly upon the pair, as Jasper, no less solemnly, wiped the dagger he had fought with and put it up.

"Come, Lady Leila. Lady Graciella, your gypsy protectors are no more. Your old life as the gypsy maiden Joyous ends as you enter upon your new life as the Duchess of Dorramanca. It remains now but to see you righted. I doubt not that our glorious Queen

Madrella will restore to you your estates and title, deposing the false woman who now enjoys them. Come with us; we will take you in safety to the court. For me I ask no better than to live and die your devoted slave."

The Lady Graciella gave him her hand with a smile that was wonderfully radiant, considering the series of shocks that she must have just received.

This act ended with the four rescuers and rescued starting upon their return to the court of Queen Madrella, leaving the gypsy thieves dead beside their fire. The curtain was no sooner fallen that it was up again, for the audience clapped and stamped and whistled in an ecstacy of applause. It was so great that the actors felt their first misgiving. Could it be partly mirth that they detected in this uproar of clapping hands and moving feet?

The third act—for at the last moment the play was made over into three acts after all—was the court scene again, with Queen Madrella on her throne and the usurping Duchess of Dorramanca standing beside it. Enter the Lady Leila leading the Lady Graciella, no longer in her gypsy costume, which was almost a pity, for no queen often has a chance to see anything so pretty. She was now attired in sweeping robes of gold with jewels everywhere, ending in a blazing coronet of gems upon her dark hair. The Earl of Beldevote followed them, and after him came Jasper Truestaff, modestly ready to receive reward for his share of the rescue, if any

were to be awarded him. It happens sometimes on the actual stage that the last act of a drama suffers from the previous act being of the nature of an anti-climax. This was true of The Romany Duchess. In the rescue of the second act the climax was reached. But the actors in this drama put their best efforts into carrying off the final act with a rush, and succeeded in making the queen's welcome of the newly found Duchess Graciella, her deposing the interloping duchess, the wicked Lady Malora spirited and dramatic.

"As to thee, Jasper Truestaff," said the queen, standing on the steps of her throne after she had pronounced upon Lady Malora the sentence of banishment from court, and after full restoration had been made of her estates and title to the true Duchess Graciella, "as to thee, Jasper Truestaff, come hither."

Jasper, with his round solemn face, approached the throne and, at a signal from the queen, knelt at its foot.

"I will make thee my knight, for thou hast proved thyself true and leal and worthy of knighthood," said the queen. "No longer shalt thou be a retainer, even of the noble family thou servest. I will confer upon thee an estate and I will create thee knight. Rise, Sir Jasper of Joyous Castle, baronet. Thy estate shall be called Joyous in remembrance of the gypsy girl whom thou hast helped to rescue, now in her proper person, the Duchess of Dorramanca."

So saying the gracious queen tapped Jasper Truestaff upon the shoulder and he arose Sir Jasper of Joyous Castle, to the admiration of all beholders.

Then the noble Earl of Beldevote stepped forth and gracefully dropped upon one knee before the lovely little newly-restored duchess.

"Lady Graciella, when I saw thee beside the camp-fire in the forest, I loved thee," he said, with fine directness. "I shall always love thee. Wilt thou marry me?"

The lady gave him her hand. "I too loved thee, brave and noble earl, when first my eyes met thine," she said. "Yes, I will marry thee and be thy happy wife as well as the Romany Duchess." Saying which the duchess and the earl, as well as the other four actors in this scene, turned to the audience with a bow and the play was over, the curtain descending.

Tumultuous applause greeted this affecting, if somewhat abrupt end. The curtain was rung up again and the entire company called forth. Then each actor in the cast was called for separately and again the entire company together. It was not strange that the intoxication of that glorious hour went to the youthful heads of these author-actors.

It was just after the plaudits had been silenced, their echoes still in her ears, that Ailsa, preparing to come out among the audience with her fellow actors, heard her sister-in-law's voice replying to someone.

"Yes, indeed, Ailsa is clever," she was saying.

"The children all helped a little in building the play, but Ailsa was the moving spirit; Ailsa always is the moving spirit. Yes, I really think they did remarkably well; I enjoyed it, though I knew it by heart. But wasn't it funny! They are such children still, though they are in their 'teens! And they take it all so seriously, even clever little Ailsa! They do not realize how much amusement is mixed with the applause. Dear little souls! Yes, I am proud of them. I am delighted that you are so kind as to say all you do of the dear, funny little drama."

Ailsa could not hear the other part of this conversation, but its nature was evident.

A swift, sore wrath boiled up in her, unreasonably, the result of the reaction from the excitement of that vociferous applause. So they were all laughing at her, at them all who had acted in The Romany Duchess, at the play itself! It was to them but a child's frolic, the make-believe of little children, and they had been applauding, not admiringly, but with kindly, grown-up toleration, that held in it something not far from ridicule!

Ailsa had a hot temper. It was rarely aroused; none of the Bretts had seen it that winter, or had seen but a flash of it. Occasionally Ailsa flew into a passion that mastered her, a tropical, burning rage that wiped out reason. It came upon her now, and, of all persons in the world, she was enraged with Molly-Mary, kind, sweet, lovable and loving Molly-Mary!

It was precisely because she had been adoring

her all along that Ailsa was furious that she should laugh at her—Molly-Mary, upon whose sympathy she counted! Besides which the girl was so excited and over-wrought that she was like a little package of explosives. All things together made her the victim of one of her sudden, swift, overpowering fits of temper. She turned like a flash and started back, pale and trembling, and ran away. She met no one, and in the crowd out beyond, where the audience had sat, she was not missed until people asked for her to pay her the lion's share of praise for the spirit of her acting. If the foolish little girl could have known it, her adult critics were sincerely and warmly praising her. But she could not be found and no one could say what had become of her.

Nan hurried off to look for her. The last place she thought of looking was in Ailsa's own room, for they had intended all along to keep the young people in the audience for an impromptu dance after the play, and Nan did not imagine that Ailsa would withdraw. Most of all of them, Ailsa loved dancing.

But Nan found Ailsa's door shut and fast locked, and Ailsa's voice, queer and husky, called to her: "Go away, Nan: I'm tired. No; I'm not going down again. Please go away." Outside the door Nan, instead of going away, pleaded for admittance and for Ailsa to join their friends downstairs. "What will they think?" she repeated over and over. At last Ailsa yielded to the force of public opinion and

went down, her state of mind not improved by being obliged to yield.

There was an uproarious frolic going on, Nan threw herself into it with rare high spirits. Ailsa danced and tried to smile, but when her evil spirit was upon her it held her captive; she could not smile successfully, nor, successfully, pretend to enjoy herself.

"Poor little mercury! She has worked so hard and done so well, so brilliantly well, that now she's dropped all the way down below zero, from the height of excited joy! You'll feel happy enough to-morrow, after you've slept, Ailie darling, and when I tell you how pleased people were with you children and your work, and especially with that lovely gypsy dance," said Molly-Mary, unsuspecting, her loving smile and her honest eyes beaming on Ailsa.

Ailsa turned away with her own eyes dropped lest Molly-Mary see the anger that she knew burned in them. As it was, the expression of the girl's clouded face startled her sister-in-law, but she comforted herself by recalling how tired Ailsa must be; she had worked hard for and in the play, had thought of it and of nothing else for weeks past and she was such an excitable little piece of enthusiasms that this was but a natural nervous reaction. Still Mrs. Brett had never seen Ailsa look like that. She found herself going back to it and hoping that the night's sleep in her sunny golden room would banish the black shadow that rested on the pretty mobile face.

CHAPTER XIII

AILSA JUDGES FOR HERSELF

The next morning there was, for there could be, but one topic of conversation at the breakfast table. "The Romany Duchess," its authors and actors were discussed from every point of view, proudly, for the young Bretts felt that it was a success, and the elder Bretts fully concurred in this opinion, albeit they could see the funny side of the dramatic event as the younger ones could not be expected to. Amid the chatter Ailsa sat silent, her eyes downcast, her interest, apparently concentrated on nothing more dramatic than an orange, cereal and an egg. It was so utterly beyond experience to find Ailsa the only one who had nothing to say that, after sundry telegrams from her children's eyes, Mrs. Brett said:

"What has come over our moving spirit? You carried off the laurels last night, Ailie; were they hops, after all? I never knew you silent. Sleepy? You feel well, don't you, dearie?"

Ailsa raised her eyes and looked at her sister-in-law for the first time. Mrs. Brett was startled by the gloom in the usually flashing, laughing dark eyes. If it had not been Ailsa, she told herself, she would have thought them the eyes of someone who disliked her. The

look that she had caught the night before on the pretty, dark face recurred to her. Perhaps she did not know Ailsa on all sides yet; she was not like transparent, simple Nan: there were complexities in this clever girl, and, it might be, twists of temper that her sister-in-law did not know. She felt her heart sink, for she did not want to believe that there were winding channels below the surface of the young girl's mind.

"Aren't you well, Ailie dear? Tired?" she repeated.

"No, sister Mary," said Ailsa gravely, and the new title moved Mrs. Brett to amusement that, unfortunately, leaped into her eyes for Ailsa to see before it could be crushed.

"I am not at all tired," Ailsa continued, her color rising as she caught the gleam in Mrs. Brett's merry blue eyes on hearing the title which Ailsa had meant should be dignified and impressive. "But I do not care to discuss the play, Mary, if you please."

"Certainly not, my dear, if you would rather not. But we are all feeling this morning that Shakespeare was quite right to declare 'the play's the thing.' And you were such a large part of it that it isn't easy to leave you out of the talk," returned Mrs. Brett quietly.

Nan's eyes were growing bigger as she watched Ailsa, and clouding as they dilated, while a soft flush, a flag of distress, mounted in her face.

"Ailsa, what's the matter?" she cried.

"Are you trying to crush the mother with your

'sister Mary' stuff?" demanded Dins, unwisely.

"Why should I want to crush my sister-in-law, and why should I not call her by her own name, instead of a silly nickname?" asked Ailsa, with overwhelming dignity.

"Oh, come off!" cried Dins, with boyish irreverence and frankness. "You don't suppose we can't see you have a grouch, do you? I'd like to know what under the canopy should grouch you, this morning, of all days! Everybody simply falling all over themselves to throw bouquets at you, and you turning lemon drop!"

"If father hadn't left early he'd have got Ailsa to tell," observed Tilly, with still less judgment.

"My brother would not have made me tell you anything I preferred to keep to myself," said Ailsa with spirit. "But I suppose he would have remembered I was his guest and let me alone if I wished it."

"Quite true, dear Ailie," said Mrs. Brett gently, with a warning glance at her brood. The young Bretts were the more incensed at this new attitude on Ailsa's part that it was so wholly unlike her and that it had come to light on this morning when they were all overflowing with their triumphs, above all that she showed her irritation directly to their mother.

"We will not bother Ailsa, children. I am sorry that she does not feel well; I am sure she is not well and it is not strange. She worked so hard and was so excited—we all were, but not as much so as the heroine of the play and the chief author. By and by, dearie, come and rest

in your own Molly-Mary's room and tell her all about it."

Mrs. Brett smiled her warm smile at the pouting girl, but her eyes were grave. She did not understand this sort of anger and she felt sure that there was more to it than she knew. If only Ailsa would flare up and speak out, as all her own young Bretts did, and have it over with! She would have understood and preferred even a bit of impertinence better than this smouldering wrath.

"There is nothing that I have to tell you about, Mary," said Ailsa, speaking coldly, but trembling, for she loved this dear woman with all her heart and she began to feel that it was hard to wound her. Yet because she loved her, Ailsa found it hard also to forgive what she considered Molly-Mary's ridicule of the play.

"I have a note here," Ailsa went on, turning to Nan and trying to smile, though Nan's blank and grieved dismay was not easier to meet. "Did you and Dins get one? A note of invitation—from the Browers?" Ailsa hesitated, in spite of herself, over this announcement. When she came to utter it aloud the name of Browers supplemented ill her unkind manner to her sister-in-law.

"I didn't get any note," said Nan.

"Nor I," added Dins. "I wonder why we didn't! Invitation, did you say? To what?"

"To the Browers' this evening. The note is from Billie Brower, in the name of all four of them. She asks me to a frolic at their house

to-night, and I'm to stay all night, because they're too far off for me to get back; it will be late when it's all over, Billie says. She doesn't tell me what sort of a frolic it is, but she says she won't take no for an answer; none of them will. They were here for the play last night and they——" Ailsa checked herself; her tone was getting enthusiastic. "They didn't think the play was bad," she added, getting her voice back to its new level indifference of tone.

"Well, I call that going some!" cried Dins. "Asking you and simply dropping out Nan and myself! I'd expect them to ask me, anyhow; the Browers are always fine to boys. And I could have brought you home," added Dins naively.

"I suppose they know that your mother does not care about them and that you would not have been allowed to go," said Ailsa.

"My mother lets us do everything we ought to do!" cried Gussie, unexpectedly, catching the condemnatory note in Ailsa's voice.

The child's remark proved to Mrs. Brett that she was right in thinking that Ailsa's was suggesting an unfavorable criticism of her attitude toward her children's acquaintance with these undesirable Brower girls.

"Ailsa knows that, little Gussie. She has often said that I let the children turn our tiny world upside down for a good time," she said, quietly. "Ailie, dear girl, you are not implying that the Brower girls expected you to accept this invitation, which excludes the rest of the

family, and that you mean to accept it?"

"If they hadn't thought I'd go I don't see why they asked me," said Ailsa. "You—nor Gus either—wouldn't want to forbid me doing what I wanted to do, like your own children—as you would Nan, I mean?"

Mrs. Brett hesitated and Ailsa, seeing her hesitation, frowned and tossed her head ever so slightly, but Mrs. Brett saw it and realized that here was a case where tact must be used. Whatever had come over loving, frank Ailsa, she was plainly in no mood to receive commands. Mrs. Brett wondered how far her brother and sister's authority extended, or would be admitted in regard to Ailsa's conduct.

"I would be sorry enough to have you go, Ailsa dear," she said gently. "As to forbidding, we never have to go so far, do we? As long as we sisters, the big one and the little one, are so fond of each other we are not likely to think of prohibitions and commands. But if I supposed that you thought of accepting this invitation, Ailsa, I should beg you to forego this pleasure; it would not prove a pleasure to you, I am only too sure of that."

"I do want to go," said Ailsa, discovering on the instant this fact which had not been clear to her before. The truth was she was too out of humor to fail to be annoyed by Molly-Mary's unvarying gentleness, her old affectionate way, which ignored Ailsa's altered manner.

"I am quite, quite sure you do not, little sister," said Mrs. Brett. "You would not have

the good time that you have with Mona and Kit and your contemporaneous niece, Nannie, and our own lively boyish boys. And I, personally, ask you not to cultivate these acquaintances. You are such a dear child, Ailie, that you have no idea how unpleasant you would find girls who like to imitate fast ways. I don't want you to have an idea of it, so I ask you not to go. I don't say that the Brower girls realize the harm they do, first to themselves and then to others, but their type is not suitable as companions for our dear gypsy duchess."

It was an unfortunate ending of an appeal that had half shaken Ailsa's determination to go to the Browers' party. It revived her memory of her grievance; she hardened her heart; her face reflected that hardening. Mrs. Brett, puzzled and sorry, saw that she had lost the ground she had gained.

"Please do not talk about it," Ailsa said. "I don't see why you are prejudiced against the Brower girls, though they do dress queer and may be a little too lively. They can't harm me: I like quiet clothes and—well, I suppose I may as well say nice ways. But if our ways are rather nicer, that doesn't mean those girls aren't as good as we are. I think I'll go, Mary. If Dins was asked he'd go—or want to."

"Dins would not go; I hope he would not want to go. Your brother and I have authority over him. Down in the bottom of his heart Dins knows, though he may not say so, that the Brower girls are not good friends for you—or

for him—to make. Dear little Ailie, I will not try to claim authority over you, but I ask you not to go, for my sake, and I warn you that if you do go you will wish that you had heeded your frumpy old Molly-Mary, who loves you and wants you to have all the fun you can and not pay a heavy price for it."

Mrs. Brett rose from the table as she spoke, pushing back her plate; the meal had long been over. She left the room, wise enough not to add a word to her appeal.

Nan ran around and caught Ailsa in her arms. "I wouldn't go for the world after that, would you, Ailie? How dear mumsy is!" she cried.

Ailsa looked ready to cry. "She makes a fuss about nothing, Nan," she said. "And I've just found out—never mind! What a nuisance when people think everything in bad taste is wrong! The Browers aren't in good taste, but they're nice. Maybe I wouldn't have gone once, but now I shall—wouldn't you, Dins?"

"No," said Dins, with a shake of his head, "I wouldn't, not in your place. I'd feel I had to consider my sister-in-law's opinions while I visited her and I think I'd want to please her, if she was the kind of all around horn-of-plenty-for-good-times mumsy is. Take my advice, Ailsa, and cut it out. What's come over you, anyway? I think mums is mistaken about the good time; I'm sure you'd have a dandy time, but if I were in your shoes I wouldn't have it."

Nevertheless, Ailsa persisted in her determination, though no one but herself knew how many

times she was on the point of giving it up and how she wavered mentally when she seemed most determined. If only the girl would have opened her heart to Nan, or, better, have told Nan's mother that she was hurt and angry and why, her grievance would have been laughed and explained away, and her love for her "Molly-Mary" would have come triumphantly out of its temporary eclipse, her old delight in pleasing her sister been restored. But Ailsa kept her own counsel, Nan acted grieved and reproachful, Dins disgusted, the younger children were openly condemnatory that Ailsa meant to do what their mother had asked her not to do. So Ailsa's offended dignity was driven to take refuge in obstinacy, or else admit itself wrong, and Ailsa persisted in going to the Browers' that evening, though the sky fell.

Ailsa expected opposition from her brother on his return that night, and prepared herself to meet it. But, as Ailsa suspected, his wife wrought the magic of making her husband follow her example and let the girl alone, with only a request that she change her mind at the last hour.

"I'd like very much to have you tell me that you wouldn't go to the Browers' this evening, Ailsa," Mr. Brett said. "Your sister tells me that you are asked though our girl and boy are not. I should not allow them to go. I'm not going to attempt to forbid you, Ailsa, though you are my little sister and under my care, but I ask you not to go. The Brower girls manage

to make themselves a good deal talked about in Renwyck and they give good reason for unkindly interpretation of their ways. You are not old enough, and are too nice a child to understand why all this makes Renwyck parents of the better sort object to those girls as companions for their own youngsters, but you ought to see that there is nothing more unfortunate for a girl than to make people doubt that she is what we all mean by 'a nice girl.' So please, my dear, telephone these girls that you are not coming, and stay at home with us, who love you."

"I have said that I'd go, Gus," said Ailsa. "I think I'd better go. I guess the Browers are nicer than they look." Ailsa stopped with a tiny laugh, for she had not expected to say this. "You are good not to order me to stay at home: thank you, Gus. I wouldn't like to have you order me, not to-day. But I believe I'll go. I'm to stay all night, that is unless you know some way for me to get back."

"I don't," said Mr. Brett decidedly. "I object strongly to the idea of my little sister spending the night there, but I really can't go after you, nor send Dins, of course. If you go against our wishes, Ailsa, you'll have to look after yourself. I'm sorry, but if you see why your sister and I dislike your going the night won't be wasted—and I fancy you will see. It's a great thing, Ailsa, to learn by experience; it's a greater to be big enough not to require experience, but to trust yourself to loving authority."

Ailsa dressed herself in her beautiful gown with the autumnal colors in its embroidered trimmings. Mrs. Brett came to help her, but Ailsa turned away.

"What's wrong with my Ailie?" whispered that dear woman, arranging something in the back, though Ailsa silently rejected her aid, and leaning over the girl's shoulder to whisper in her ear.

"Oh dear!" sighed Ailsa, by way of reply, and her sister felt her tremble with unshed tears.

"Ailie, darling, why won't you tell me? What can have happened? Don't you know that it worries me to see you so changed?" persisted the coaxing whisper.

"Maybe I'll tell you some time, though I don't see what good it would do to tell you, it isn't as though it were something I had been told. Please don't talk to me now, Mary. I'm worried too, and I don't want to cry before I go to a party," Ailsa said chokingly.

"Cry instead, cry hard, and don't go to this party! It would be better for you, and I know you'd have a better time in the end. I can't bear to let you go, you small thing! Why won't you stay at home and believe we wouldn't ask it if we didn't know best?" pleaded Mrs. Brett.

Ailsa shook her head and pulled her long coat over her brilliant gown, gathered up her slipper bag and the other bag that held her toilet for the night, and turned toward the door. When Molly-Mary bent toward her for a good night kiss Alisa pretended not to see, busying herself

with her glove. Mrs. Brett drew back with a real stab of pain, though, if she could have seen within the stormy, wounded little heart she would have seen it suddenly melting with a longing on Ailsa's part to put her arms around Molly-Mary and stay at home to cry that heart out on her shoulder. Her grievance suddenly looked childish to Ailsa, though it had been real enough all day. The golden little room that Molly-Mary had prepared for her coming seemed full of protest against Ailsa for her resentment toward this devoted, motherly friend. Ailsa felt that now, when she was all ready, it was too late to turn back. She ran off and jumped into the waiting cab which she had asked Jimmy to call, trying to make herself believe that she was already beginning to enjoy this evening of gaiety and independence.

The Brower girls greeted her with four separate and individual bits of slang. The foible of the two older girls was to look as young as their sisters, though Billie, or Cora, really was younger than Nan Brett. Bessie and Irma were dressed in scant short skirts and wore their hair girlishly looped across their heads from ear to ear, avoiding the appearance of even the brief twenty years that they had lived. Reine and Billie were dressed in a sort of Turkish costume; the short tunic and full trousers gathered in at the ankle made Ailsa stare.

"Hello, you Great and Only!" cried Reine, shaking Ailsa by way of caress. "You were immense all right last night in that gypsy dance!

That's why we asked you here. We didn't want to ask your cousins—O, jiminy— Your niece and nephew! Isn't that the best ever! I'll never get over you're being an aunt to that bunch! Well, we didn't want to ask them because we mean to have a racket to-night. So it never struck us to ask you either, till we saw that dance. Then we said: We need her in our business! Say, it's dandy of you to come, anyhow, not resent our leaving out the rest! Ailsa's heart sank. So even the Browers expected her to be loyal to her family, and though they praised her for her deficiency, the praise was to her a rebuke.

"We're going to have a Turkish thing; we don't know precisely how we'll do it, but I guess a heap of cushions, some cigarettes and the music will give us a tip when we get to it. It's really an excuse for Billie and my costume. Isn't this nifty?" Reine executed a few dance steps and a kick to illustrate the possibilities of the Turkish costume.

Ailsa slipped out of her coat with only a murmured response. She felt like a very small cat in the strangest of garrets. This was what her brother and sister had meant! She saw it and, what is more, she felt it to her finger tips at once. She did not belong here, she was not at home with this sort of girl. Alone, without any of her own kin or friends in the Brower house, sensitive Ailsa instantly felt in a foreign land. It was a quiet, subdued Ailsa that followed Reine downstairs and was presented to

Mrs. Brower, not as to the hostess who must recognize and welcome each young guest, but in a casual way, as if Mrs. Brower happened to be there and so Reine introduced Ailsa to her.

Mrs. Brower was intentionally younger looking than the mother of the young Bretts. She was highly colored, handsomer than her daughters, but even less well-mannered. Her gown was over-trimmed, her chest glittered with chains, her eyes were hard and bright under brows that greater experience than Ailsa's would have known were pencilled. She greeted Ailsa with a breezy assumption of youthful equality and a laugh that jarred on the girl's ear.

"My girls tell me you are some dancer," she said. "You must do your part later on."

The room filled with about twenty young people, none of whom Ailsa knew. She began to see, after a time, that some of them were well past twenty, nearly thirty. It was part of this house's programme to make everybody young together; years were forbidden to do their work.

The young men were older than the boys whom Ailsa knew, except a few, and these were older than the older ones in looks and manners. It seemed to be the rule that all grown women were to be young girls, but that all boys were to be men of the world. Ailsa felt timid and more little girlish than ever before in her winter in Renwyck. Her quick wit was dulled, her ready tongue hesitated, she shrank into herself and

began to wish with all her heart that she had not come, though she could not have clearly told why.

There was music and dancing, a good deal of laughter, a rapid fire of slangy witticisms that did not seem to Ailsa funny, even when she understood it, and this was by no means always. The boys treated the Browers and the other girls with familiarity, but it did not seem one bit like the happy, frank, yet respectful intimacy of the Brett set. Reine and Billie Brower posed on a pile of cushions; that seemed to be the extent of the reason for their wearing a Turkish costume, until cigarettes were passed and, to Ailsa's horror, Reine and Billie lighted one with the air of accustomedness. The Turkish pose did not warrant this, shocked Ailsa thought, but looking around she discovered that nearly all the girls were puffing away on cigarettes. It was not wicked, but it was disgusting. Ailsa had a sudden wave of something like homesickness sweep over her. If only she had not come! If only she were at home in her pretty golden room, confessing to Molly-Mary how offended she had been and how foolish, for now she saw that Molly-Mary had only laughed at the play kindly, with plenty of pride in it all the while. If only this were all done and Molly-Mary had kissed her good night, forgiving her as that blessed woman would do, and she were dropping asleep with her stubborn head on her pillow, safe in that pretty room, in

that kindly, happy, loving, well-bred, innocent home!

"You've got to give us that gypsy dance, Ailsa," she heard Irma Brower saying. "It's the best ever. First you'll do it solo, and then we'll make Thad Byrnes do it with you. He can catch on to any dance this side Zululand the minute he sees it. We'll get dancing good and lively after supper. Say, kid, what makes you so awfully quiet? You're sort of kindergartenish, did you know it? Wake up. We thought you were full of sand. What's wrong with you?"

"I left something in the dressing room I want, Irma," said Ailsa, with entire truth.

She got up with a sense of suffocation. Dance for all these queer, unmannerly, cigarette smoking girls? For these ill-bred boys? Never! She should not have come; Molly-Mary and her brother had been right, but now—well, she must not stay!

"I'm going up to get it. Don't bother, Irma; I know the way. Just let me slip up alone."

"Go ahead, kiddie, but you're slipping up all right, all right!" laughed Irma. "I never thought you would be so pokey and—juvenile."

Ailsa went out of the room; no one followed her. There was a clock in the hall; she saw that it pointed to twenty minutes past eleven. Fearful to think of going out in the streets alone at that hour, but that was what she was going to do! Ailsa felt as though anything were better than staying here, where ways were free

and easy, and manners beyond her ken.

She saw a telephone standing on the table in the upper hall, and hailed it as a deliverer. She rang up the stable where her brother always got his carriages. She rang and rang, but it was long before she got an answer; the livery man was asleep, but the bell rang also into his house, as well as into the stable, and at last he answered sleepily.

"This is Miss Ailsa Brett, Mr. Augustus Brett's sister. I am at the Browers'; you know the house? Then please send a carriage to take me home at once. I was to have been gone all night, but I want to go home. Please send at once, will you?"

Ailsa had spoken softly and the noise downstairs had drowned her voice to those below. She put up the receiver with a sigh of intense gratitude and ran to the dressing room, had off her slippers and on her street shoes in no time, pulled on her coat, tied up her hair in her scarf, seized her bags and started for the stairs. She could not face the people who would be sure to see her, nor explain her flight. She looked around for other avenue of escape and discovered the back stairs. Down these she fled, frightening the maids below within an inch of their lives, went out the back door, bidding one of the maids tell the Brower girls that Miss Brett had gone home.

"But don't you tell them for a long time, remember!" warned Ailsa. The girl was a good Irish girl, with her race's quickness, as well as

an Irish woman's standard of propriety of behavior.

"Go along wid you, alanna," she said. "Sure I'll tell 'em after you're far beyant here. It's no place for a little lady, an' a little girl like you, an' it's myself is not stayin' here whin me month's up. Fun an' dancin' an' all frolicsomeness is good, but not the wildness an' bad manners these girls to be practishin'."

Fortified by this approval of her action and confirmation of her opinion, Ailsa ran around the house to wait for the carriage and good Norah followed her, to wait with her and see her safely bestowed.

It was some time before the cab arrived, but it came at last and thankfully Ailsa sank into a corner of its seat and was borne homeward through the deserted streets of Renwyck.

The Brett house was silent and dark when she drove up. She began to despair of arousing it as she rang and rang, and finally knocked on the door.

A light appeared, glimmering uncertainly through the figures of the opaque glass in the door, then developing into a small light, advancing toward the stairs above. Ailsa saw Mrs. Brett coming down, a kimono over her shoulders, a small electric bull's eye searchlight in her hand.

"Who's there?" she demanded through the door, then, as Ailsa called her name, she cried: "Ailsa!" in a startled voice and hastily unbarred the bolts.

"Ailsa, child, what is it?" she demanded as Ailsa stumbled in and burst out crying on the motherly shoulder of her beloved Molly-Mary, as she had been longing to do all day.

"It's nothing, Molly-Mary," Ailsa sobbed. "I'm all right. I'm more right when I cry than when I didn't. I've been horrid all day long. I was mad. I heard you say something about the play, as if it wasn't much good, kind of kiddish. It made me mad: I honestly believe it sort of hurt me, too; I hope it did, for that's better. Anyway, I couldn't get over it. That's why I went to-night! Molly-Mary, I couldn't stand it. They're grown up and I don't like the way they did it. I don't like any of their friends, and the girls smoked cigarettes, all of them, and Reine and Billie had on Turkish costume—they're unpleasant! I felt uncomfortable. I never want to go there again, nor see them. I just slipped out and telephoned for a carriage and came home. I was afraid, but I couldn't stay there all night, and they were going to get me to do the gypsy dance. And a nice Irish girl said I was right to leave and she waited for the carriage with me—she was the truest lady in that house! Molly-Mary, you dear, darling sister, will you forgive me? Indeed and indeed I'm sorry and ashamed! I don't see how I ever was so silly. If you did laugh at us; I guess we were funny, the play, too, and I might have known how lovely you laughed at us, for you're always the dearest thing in the world, whatever you do!"

Ailsa had poured out this long confession, mingled with abundant tears and hysterical sobs. Mrs. Brett patted her back consolingly and kissed her, trying, as she said laughingly, "to find a dry place for it."

"It's all right, childie; don't cry. Be sure I laughed at the play, if laugh I did—I don't remember—with amusement at whatever was funny in it and childish, but with a great deal of pride in my clever chickens. Why didn't you tell me, Ailie? Always give people a chance to make good, when you're offended with them. It's all right, little Ailie! Come to bed. I'm glad you see why I don't care about the Brower girls for your acquaintances. You can make amends by teaching Dins not to seek them. Come, I'm going to tuck you in your little bed!"

And in a short time Ailsa was wearily, but cozily dropping off to sleep, as she had been longing to do, in her own golden room, soothed and forgiven by Molly-Mary's loving good night kiss.

CHAPTER XIV

A TRIANGULAR TANGLE

Early the next morning Reine Brower called up the Brett house and asked for Ailsa.

"Hello there!" she cried cheerfully over the wire. "Did you get home safe? If our girl hadn't told us what had become of you we might have been scared. Do you mind telling what struck you? It certainly was a queer game you put up; seems to me I never heard of company sneaking a snook like that!"

Ailsa could not help laughing. "It was pretty rude," she admitted into her receiver. "I was going to write you this morning. You see if I hadn't stolen away you would have tried to keep me, there'd have been a lot of talk and bother, so I thought I'd better go last night, and ask you to excuse me to-day."

"I can see why you wanted to get out of being teased to stay, if you had made up your mind to go, but what set you off? We expected you to stay all night. You've got to own up it was awfully queer," persisted Reine.

"I'll own it," said Ailsa promptly. "But I had to come home. I—I wanted to come. Please pardon the rudeness. You didn't need me and I—wanted to come home."

"I don't think you're a success at explain-

ing!" Reine Brower's voice sounded angry, yet she laughed. "At least you're honest; you don't say you were sick, or had broken your arm, or anything. You didn't like our party, that's the size of it. I'd be mad all through, if it wasn't so funny—and I'm mad pretty deep as it is."

"Try to forgive me and don't ever ask me again, Reine," said honest Ailsa. "I'm sorry I went; I ought not to have gone anywhere that Nan and Dins weren't asked. I'll be going away this spring, I suppose, home again, so you may as well forget all about me. There's no use in fibbing—and I would hate to do it anyway. You see, Reine, we don't like the same sort of fun. I'm livelier than Nan, but—please forgive for accepting your invitation and then running off. It was wrong of me and I'm sorry."

"You mean you're sorry you came, Miss Ailsa! So am I! But I'll forgive you—I guess we girls smoked you out! Good bye. You're a cute kid; if only you weren't such a little lady you'd be all right. I thought you would have more go in you! Go right on being a little blue ribbon girl and we girls will go on our way. Good bye, Ailsa Brett. No bones are broken, I'll forgive you! So long!"

Ailsa echoed the good bye and hung up the receiver.

"That's the end of my acquaintance with the Brower girls," she said, turning away. Then she saw that only Dins was in the room and that



"Ailsa, Child, What Is It?"

he was hearing her end of the conversation with an amazed face.

"Hello, Dins," she said. "Good morning. You didn't know what an awful thing I did last night—not that I'm sorry! I am sorry that I went to the Browers' at all, though. I'm properly sorry that I trampled on your blessed mother's advice and wishes, but I'm cured! Dins, let me tell you about that party!"

Ailsa dropped into the nearest chair opposite to Dins', and with her elbows on the table, her face in her hands, earnestly and effectively sketched the guests and manners which she had encountered the previous night.

Dins listened with a puzzled frown. "I shouldn't fancy that sort of ways," he said as Ailsa ended. "I can't stand sporty girls, but they have always been so nice to me, Ailsa!"

"Don't you get to knowing them any better, Nephew Dins," said Ailsa, laughing, but in earnest. "I can't stand sporty girls, either. It will be a safe rule for you to try your acquaintances by Molly-Mary and Nan. What Molly-Mary likes is all right, and she's full of fun, too. And what you'd want Nan to do—I mean the people who do what you'd want Nan to do, are the right girls to know. You and I needed a lesson and I had it. Honestly, Dins, I'm ashamed to death to think I went there when your mother asked me not to! Especially that I never really liked the Brower girls' ways—you don't, either. As to being nice to you, they'd be certain to be nice to you boys. Take

your old auntie's advice, and don't cultivate sporty girls! I wouldn't have gone there if I hadn't been offended with darling Molly-Mary. Fancy a mosquito like me being offended with her!"

"I thought you 'had a mad on her,' as those East Side New York stories say. What was wrong?" asked Dins interestedly.

"Idiocy!" replied Ailsa in one candid word. "I heard her laughing—just a little fun—poking, it was—at our play, and I hadn't sense enough to know she was proud and pleased all the while. So I flew up and was mad all through. I hope it was partly because I was excited and tired, but I know I'll ne'er be such a dunce again! I'm desperately sorry! Then, to prove the play wasn't kiddish, and that I was able to be perfectly independent in my judgment, and choose my friends, as well as write and act, I went to the Browers'! Such a dunce!" Ailsa pulled her own hair penitentially.

"What I like about you, Aunt Ailsa, is the wholesale way you sail into everything," remarked Dins. "When you were mad with mumsy, mad you were, and wouldn't listen to her. Now you're converted from the error of your ways, you lay yourself out flat! You're the own daughter of that Mother Goose lady who 'lived in clover and when she died she died all over.'"

"I think you take after me—or you ought to, as I'm your aunt, but I don't see how you can since you're older than I am. We ought to be

careful, Dinsmore, my dear, which way we face, since we always jump in over our heads," said Ailsa rising. "Just you make a point of knowing nice girls, for one thing."

"I do," said Dins. "Kit and Mona are nice girls."

"They certainly are; Mona especially is as sweet as she can be," agreed Ailsa warmly.

Nan, coming into the room at that moment, heard only this answer. She tried to smile happily in response to Ailsa's unusually warm morning greeting—Ailsa was in a mood of contrition that made her realize how dear all this family was—but she succeeded only partly. Mona and Ailsa had been growing more and more friendly through the days of play preparations. Mona's admiration for Ailsa was unbounded and it did not require the sensitiveness of Nan's love for Mona to see that Nan was no longer first in her dearest chum's thoughts. Poor little Nan—for she was like "Little Nan," though she was considerably taller than Ailsa—found this a two-fold hardship. It was hard to have her dearest intimate friend preferring another girl, hard that this girl should be Ailsa, who was as dear to Nan as Mona was, though in another way. Altogether it was a complicated bit of twisted triangle of girlish friendship, and the clearest thing about it to Nan was that it hurt in several ways.

"Did Mona say anything to you about coming over this morning, Nan?" asked Ailsa.

Nan shook her head. "Is she coming?" she

inquired with an effort that Ailsa noted.

"Weren't we to figure up our profits?" suggested Ailsa.

"Could we do that so soon?" asked Nan.

Dins laughed. "What's the matter with you two?" he cried, unconscious that he was adding to the list of questions. "All you do is ask each other questions and neither of you answers. Is it fashionable now to wear interrogation marks all over your conversation?"

"No, that's why I'll answer yours," returned Ailsa quickly. "I suppose you don't know there were two in that remark of yours; it seems to be catching."

"Set down one for Miss Ailsa Brett, my aunt," ordered Dins to an imaginary scorer.

Mona and Kit appeared around the corner at that instant and were not long in reaching the house. Mona burst into the room ahead of Kit and made a dive at Ailsa, too impetuous to take account of Nan.

"Ailsa, you dear! You clever dear!" she cried. "The way you acted that night! And that gypsy dance! I wanted dreadfully to see you yesterday, but you knew I had to go with mother to spend the day at my aunt's. I've been thinking about you every minute."

"I wasn't the only one; you all did as well as I did," said Ailsa. "Did Ham tell you how much we had taken in?" Ham was the treasurer.

"We took in sixty-seven dollars and fifty cents!" cried Kit and Mona together triumph-

antly. "If anyone knows what the expenses were we'll know how much we made," added Mona.

"So we shall, Mona, that is if anyone has gone as far as that in subtraction," cried Ailsa. "Dins, didn't you have the accounts?"

Dins pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, striped with dark creases from rubbing against the lining of the pocket.

"Got on tick at Hammatt's one piece of green stuff for hangings—back of stage you know," Dins interrupted his reading to explain. "Fifty yards at four cents is two dollars. They let us have it at four because we took such a lot and because we were a Worthy Object. Then the canton flannel for the regal robes, that we got at six cents and we had twenty yards—that's a dollar and twenty cents—that's three twenty. There were a few other items, but we're safe to count on having at least the sixty dollars to hand over; our expenses didn't pass the seven fifty, at the worst. I don't think that's half bad—for kids! For kids to raise for a kid, you know!"

"I think it's fine! I think it's perfectly wonderful!" cried Mona, deeply impressed.

"We certainly were successful."

"Of course we have to remember that people were nice about it. They bought tickets because they knew us and we were young, so they liked to encourage us, and then we were going to give the money to that baby," said honest

Nan, whose instinct for perfect truth and fairness was strong.

Mona turned on her pettishly. "Oh, goodness, Nan Brett, what do you want to spoil things for? Everybody said the play was lovely and that they enjoyed it! you talk as if it was only to be kind to a lot of children people came. It was nice, everybody says so! I don't see why you want to make it nothing at all."

"I didn't," began Nan chokingly, but stopped.

"Nan never wants the least thing seen crooked or said crooked," interposed Ailsa, with a smile that was meant to be reassuring, but which had an opposite effect. It did not mend matters for Nan to have someone defend her to Mona, to whom she was supposed to need no defence. "After all, Nan is right," Ailsa went on. "It was a good play, considering, but you do have to consider! That's what I wouldn't do either, yesterday, Mona, so I was quite horrid." She did not explain further, but Mona cried enthusiastically:

"You never were horrid in all your life, Ailsa! I just know it. You're such a dear! I can't imagine how we got along in Renwyck before you came, just by ourselves."

"Wouldn't it be funny if boys plastered one another with taffy the way you girls do?" said Dins rising to leave the room with an amused and masculine superior smile.

His mother met him in the doorway and turned him back, a hand on each shoulder.

"Right about face, lad Dinsmore!" she com-

manded. "I have news for you. The Dramatic Association is invited to a banquet—of a mild sort!—this evening at Brett Castle—with the queen!"

"Oh, mumsy!" "Oh, Molly-Mary!" "Oh you lovely Mrs. Brett!" cried Nan and Ailsa and Mona and Kit, in chorus, effective though impromptu.

"It is even so," nodded Mrs. Brett joyously. "Amanda and I are going to make a treat that will be neither elaborate nor poor, we hope. Dins, you must tell the boys."

"May I stay all night? You asked me to stay sometime soon and I haven't stayed in ages," begged Mona. "Kit stayed last. May I?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Brett heartily, while Nan brightened and cried:

"I was thinking just the other day how long it had been since I had you over, Mona."

Mona looked embarrassed. "You wouldn't care if I slept with Ailsa this time, would you, Nan? She said once I might try her lovely golden room and I thought I'd like to visit her this time. She won't be here so dreadfully much longer, I'm afraid."

"Why, of course," murmured Nan, turning away with the light fading out of her pretty face.

Her mother watched and listened to this small tragedy with great pity for her dear girl in her heart. She was not one of those who forget how keen is the pain of the first wounds to affec-

tion, nor how bitter is a disappointment in a friend to a girl of fifteen who has been worshipping that friend. She had long known that Mona was not capable of the strong devotion which Nan felt for her; she saw that Ailsa's unquestioned charms had fascinated and dazzled Mona and she could have cried to know that Nan felt wounded to the quick that Mona could prefer another to her, though that other were Ailsa, whom Nan loved dearly.

She wondered how Ailsa would act; it was not in the least Ailsa's fault, yet she might be able to mend matters, if she were loyal and wise.

Ailsa's bright eyes glanced at Nan and then quickly away. "I wouldn't shut my yellow room door on you, Mona, if you want to come in, but you'll get precious little good of the yellowness, or the prettiness at night, when you're asleep. Still, you have to try it once—like chicken pox! I can see you pounding yourself for wasting a visit on Nannie-nice," she said. And she won an approving look from her Molly-Mary that warmed her heart. Ailsa was still sore and ashamed that she had failed in love and duty toward Molly-Mary.

"I'd like to have you come to my banquet in the costumes of the play," said Mrs. Brett, who perfectly understood the pleasure of "dressing up."

"How fine!" cried Kit. "I was wishing we'd be asked to give the play over again; I want to wear my costume."

"What time, Mrs. Brett?" asked Mona,

talking short hand," as the girls said she did.

"About three, to be here while the sun is still high. We're to have a group of the play taken out of doors. I think a background of real trees will serve instead of our woods scene, and a snap shot may turn out better than a time exposure for such a large group," said Mrs. Brett.

The two girls and two boys came promptly, their costumes bundled up, or in bags, for, though Kit would have rather enjoyed wearing hers through the streets in broad daylight, regal robes of canton flannel are not adapted for walking out.

Mrs. Brett was the photographer. She took several snap shots of the characters in the play, posed for various scenes in it, and then a group of all the characters together. Finally the actors begged for a picture of Ailsa alone in one of the poses of her gypsy dance and her sister-in-law took that, after which she retired to remove her film and get it ready for developing; none of the actors wanted to wait an unnecessary moment to see the result.

When "the banquet" was served Mrs. Brett played for a supper march and the costumed young folk were ushered into a dining room turned into a sylvan grove, on a small scale, by green vines and branches. Amanda presided, big and beaming beneath a bright colored turban which Mrs. Brett had persuaded her to wear, under the plea of its being a costume supper; in reality because it made the jetty

blackness of Amanda's highly polished complexion most effective. Peggy, in a swamping bow of ribbon, sat whimpering beside the fragrantly loaded table, ready to sit up and beg as soon as anyone came to receive her petition. Middy, growing up to his name more and more as he grew older and the Midas-touch of gold in his coat deepened in shade, was ready to waive the formality of a petition and to jump on the table to help himself. Amanda kept a watchful eye upon him and a restraining hand ready to catch him by the yellow bow which he wore, a bow nearly as large as Peggy's green one.

Mr. Brett, as an active member of the Dramatic Association, though not an actor, appeared at the banquet a trifle late. Ham read his report of receipts and Mr. Brett, in a brief speech applauded to the echo at its close, announced that he had paid the bill at Hammatt's for materials used in the play, so that the Association had sixty-five dollars to turn in toward the maintenance of the baby for whom the play was given.

"How long will sixty five dollars keep a baby out of an asylum?" asked Tilly.

"They don't drink anything but milk; you could tell exactly, if you could find out how many quarts of milk it took a day to feed 'em," said practical Jimmy.

"It's a lot for us to have kept her out a month!" cried Nan, naturally inclined to see things at their best.

"I predict that this particular baby in ques-

tion will never go to an asylum," said Mr. Brett, nodding so meaningly that everyone saw this was no mere empty prophecy.

"Oh, say, Daddy Brett, are you onto anything?" cried Dins, surmising the truth.

Mr. Brett only smiled. "When do you intend taking the money to Miss Broad?" he asked.

"To-morrow?" suggested Ailsa interrogatively.

"Wait till afternoon, then, and perhaps you can take her more than the rescue fund from the play," said Mr. Brett with a smile that was an assurance.

"As sure as guns you've had luck about that splendid old trump's money!" cried Dins.

"I'll let you know to-morrow morning, and if I have 'had luck' you shall take her the news with your fund from the play," said Mr. Brett.

Mrs. Brett fairly beamed from her end of the table. "Isn't it delightful? I hope you are all proud of your father, lively Bretts!" she said, glowing under her halo of fluffy bright hair, like a sort of domesticated sun.

"We are, we are!" cried the young Bretts, in a chorus increased by the unrelated members of the Dramatic Association, all of whom loved the elder Bretts.

"What are we to do to finish up the evening?" asked Dins, as they followed Mrs. Brett from the "banquet" of which so little was left that Amanda chuckled as she gathered up the fragments.

"Maybe you chilluns had a play suppah, but you wa'n't playin' much when you eatin' it; looks mighty like good, se' yous wohk you done 'scomplish," she said, shaking her sides in supreme satisfaction; Amanda, like most human beings, enjoyed appreciation.

"Let's act impromptu," cried Ailsa, replying to Dins' question. "We're costumed. Indeed we weren't playing, Amanda! I was so much in earnest that I feel weighted down this minute—with seriousness, or with supper."

Ailsa's suggestion was so good that it hardly was adopted—it went into effect by its own acceptability. There was a riotous evening, with the small room off the library turned into a stage and the most preposterous nonsense acted by the Dramatic Association, until they were all breathless from laughing and declaiming. Whereupon they ended up in a dance, for which they were never too breathless, nor Mrs. Brett too tired to play.

"You may as well stay all night, too, Kit," said Nan, which sounded like an ungracious invitation, but Kit did not misunderstand it.

"Can't do it," she said. "Mona has nothing to do in the morning; I'm going off with mother to spend the day with my stiffest relatives. I dread it, but it has to be, and we start early; I've got to be at home to leave home."

"Good night," said Nan, with a careless nod and a smile, apparently not seeing that Mona expected to kiss her good night. Nan was not angry, but she was hurt and sore; she did not

want to cry then, so she dared not risk a good night kiss to her beloved Mona, who was preferring another.

Nan swiftly undressed and crept into bed, pulling the sheet up around her head and lying with her knees drawn up and her hands over her bowed face, almost a hard knot of misery, for now she was having the "good cry" that she had deferred all the evening. The postponement had made her eyes bright with its restraint.

The door softly opened. Nan did not hear it, but suddenly she was aware of a caress on her hair that could have been given by only one hand in the world.

She turned, sobbing pitifully, to see her mother sitting on the side of the bed; she gathered poor little Nan into her arms without a word, save the dear old mother-soothing that means nothing and everything: "There, there, dear; there, my darling, don't, don't! There, there, childie, don't cry!"

Nan nestled close, feeling instantly comforted, but still she sobbed on, saying:

"Oh, mumsy, Mona loves Ailsa best! She does, she does! And I'm not mean, honestly; I love Ailsa too much. But Mona, Mona! We promised forever, you know.

"Far too long, Nannie," said Mrs. Brett, thinking it wiser to laugh a little, gently, at Nan's tragedy. "But I think Mona will swing back to you; Ailsa bewitches her, you know."

She did not say what she thought, that Ailsa would not adore Mona as Nan had done, and

that Mona would come back to faithful, gentle Nan's admiration for her. Mona had to be admired; she was not like Nan, content to worship uncritically where she had given her love. Mona found receiving, if not more blessed than giving, at least pleasanter.

"Ailsa bewitches me, too; she does everybody, but it's more than that—she's such a dear," said Nan. "She didn't try to make Mona like her so much; she couldn't help stealing her. I'm ashamed, mumsy, but it does hurt. Not so bad now you're here! I think I'd better keep you for my best and only friend! When you come and sit on my bed nights it seems as though nothing on earth mattered a speck!"

"Not even my being here?" laughed Mrs. Brett, wiping Nan's eyes and swollen face, then kissing her hot lids. "We have our visit every night, daughterkins; it seems to me, too, that nothing can be unbearable while we are such real, intimate friends!"

In the mean time the two girls in the pretty golden room had not gone to bed. Instead Ailsa had rolled herself up in a gay kimono, with a cape over her knees and sat, like one of those ball-shaped figures, surmounted with a head, arms and torso which will not tip over, her knees drawn up into her clasped arms around them.

Mona, reclining gracefully on the bed in arrested progress toward readiness for it, watched Ailsa with admiration that was sentimental.

"I never saw anything so pretty and be-

witching as you are, Ailsa Brett! With that gay thing on and your dark hair hanging, you look simply wonderful," she cried.

"You see I haven't my light hair with me to hand down," said Ailsa. "See here, Mona, I'm not going to have it! I let you come in with me to-night to tell you so. I'm not going to have it, so you might just as well stop it from this time world without end."

"Aren't going to have what?" demanded Mona, jerked upright by her surprise.

"You shifting your youthful affections to me," said Ailsa firmly. "It's all foolishness. It's only because I'm new, though it isn't half as good a reason for it as knowing me always, as you have Nan, would be. You're Nan's best, most intimate friend and you've got to stay it, as far as I'm concerned. Nan is a darling; she's worth a dozen of me, and she loves you hard and fast. Nan isn't one of the kind that chop and change! You've got to stick to her, as far as I'm concerned."

"I never heard such talk, Ailsa!" protested Mona, not knowing whether to laugh, to cry, or to be angry. "I'd like to know how you could make me like her better than you."

"I can make you like me less than her," retorted Ailsa, with spirit and cleverness.

"I want to be your best friend and I want you to be my best friend," cried Mona.

Nan is your best friend; she likes you better than I ever should," said Ailsa, shaking her brown hair all around her face with her emphasis.

"But I love you more than I do her," said Mona. "Do you suppose you can help changing! I was such a tot when Nan and I became friends! I love her, of course; she is a dear, but you—well, I never saw a girl like you!"

"That's no reason for liking me better than the others who aren't like me," Ailsa responded. "See here, Mona, I don't want to be your best friend—I must speak right out. I never should admire you the way Nan does. You're nice, I like you, Mona; I don't mean I don't, and I'll be a friend of yours, of course, but not your most intimate friend. I like Kit fully as well as I do you, and a girl at home better than either of you. Anyway, I suppose I shall be going home soon—it's almost April—and then where would you be? I've been wondering how I could make you understand, and I thought when you asked to sleep with me, I'd just plain tell you—it's the best way! I've been worrying about dear Nannie; I know she's been miserable because you were veering around. You show her it wasn't any more than a little whiff of wind and you're back again. You'd be lonely enough if you took me for your best friend; you'd miss Nan's admiration. Nan thinks you're the loveliest thing in the world, while I think you're just one of the nice, pleasant girls in it. You wouldn't like a best friend who couldn't get up any more steam than that, now would you? No one would; least of all Miss Mona Chapman. Please don't think I'm horrid, Mona; I'm not. Some day, when it won't do

any harm, I'll tell you that I like you ever so much, honestly. But you'd better keep true to Nan; you'll be glad in the end and I'll like you better if you do."

Mona had listened to this long speech with consternation in her face. She looked hurt, but even Ailsa's youthful inexperience saw that it was chiefly in her vanity.

"I don't believe, I do NOT believe anyone ever talked like this to another girl!" cried Mona, when Ailsa ceased speaking and eyed her anxiously to see the effect of her words.

"Nan wouldn't, said Ailsa. "Nan wouldn't risk hurting anyone for a bushel basketful of perfectly good planets—like Venus! She's a great deal sweeter and dearer than I ever should be. You don't know a good friend when you see one. You're lucky to have such a best friend as Nan Brett. It isn't because she's related to me, almost my sister; it's for her own sake I want her to be my best friend, if you'd like to know the truth. The idea of anyone being fickle to lovely Nannie on my account! Just drop the idea of being my most intimate friend and go show Nan you see straight at last."

"It's too dark now to see, straight or crooked," murmured Mona, confused and yielding to Ailsa's influence without further protest. There was something in little Ailsa that no one resisted. It was her peculiar and great gift to make almost everyone she came in contact with

see things as she saw them and follow her suggestions.

Ailsa laughed, much relieved. "I don't suppose I meant this very minute," she said. "But it's a good idea. Go in and tell Nan you didn't want to stay with me, after all. That you want to spend the night with her, just as you always did. That's true, you know! You don't want to stay in here now, but by and by you'll get all over being half provoked with me and see that it was all right for me to free my mind, and that you really do love Nan a million times more than me! Trot along, Mona; that was a bright idea of yours!"

Ailsa disentangled herself from her clasped hands around her knees and the folds of her kimono, by the simple expedient of rolling over on the floor and getting up straightened out. She opened the door for Mona and patted her on the back as Mona meekly went through it. Mona turned back and kissed Ailsa good night, puzzled, unable to define her own feelings, but sure somewhere below her irritation and disappointment that "Ailsa was all right."

She knocked softly on Nan's door. Nan was not asleep, though her mother had been gone some time.

"Come in," called Nan, expecting to see one of the children. She arose on her elbow and stared at Mona's unexpected apparition, but did not speak.

"Let me sleep with you, Nan. I always slept with you. I'd rather than to sleep with

Ailsa now," said Mona, following Ailsa's instruction.

Nan sprang up and threw her arms around Mona. "You dear, dear!" she cried. "It seemed awful to have you preferring another room, even Ailsa's. You see you're my best friend and I want you, aren't you, Mona?"

"Yes, I'm your best friend," said Mona, creeping into the warmth of Nan's bed and long-tried love. They fell asleep close locked, and Nan's heart was profoundly happy.

She would never know Ailsa's part in this recovery, for Mona would not tell of her defection and still less would Ailsa mention what she called, to herself: "Mona's nonsense."

Chapter XV

THE PLANK

The next morning Ailsa came running down stairs a little late to find Nan and Mona had preceded her. Mona was inclined to show by her manner that she was not on the same terms of the evening before with Ailsa. She was ill-at-ease and, pardonably, not well pleased to remember that Ailsa had snuffed out her flaming admiration, or rather had refused to feed it with the oil of dominant devotion. So she answered Ailsa coldly and stood aloof. But Ailsa would have none of this.

She caught Mona around the waist and waltzed her around and out of the room, where she could rapidly give her a sort of postscript to her marching orders.

"See here, Mona," she said low and fast into Mona's ear. "You stop acting grumpy to me! You don't really feel so, or you won't after a while, but if you act so for ever so short a time Nan will see it and think something's wrong between us and that's why you went off into her room last night. Then what would be the use of anything? What we're trying to do is to make Nannie happy; now don't you spoil it, please, by making her imagine you fell out with me. Besides we didn't fall out, did we, Mona? We're good and friendly, aren't we?" Ailsa

smiled her own bright, coaxing smile as she thrust forward her elfin face, pretty and alluring.

Mona still found her irresistible. She smiled back at her.

"One of us is good and the other is friendly," she said, and then the two girls went back to the dining room, this time in the steps of the barn dance, to vary the programme and also to advance more directly.

"Are we to take the proceeds of the play to Miss Broad to-day, father?" asked Dins at breakfast.

"Do you mean, have you any tidings to send to Miss Broad with the money?" suggested Mr. Brett. "Yes, there is good news for dear Miss Amabel. The gentleman who appropriated her funds is supposed by the general community to deserve that title. I went to see him and convinced him that it would prejudice people against him seriously if it got noised abroad that he had betrayed the trust of a lone woman and had muddled up her affairs so that money which ought to be in her credit column of the ledger stood under his name in his books, with a minus only to her account. He saw the point and was eager to make good, if I'd keep the secret. There really would not be anything to gain in having it known; he may as well have a chance to retrieve his honor, and it is also the only way to get back Miss Amabel's losses. So he had until this morning to raise the money and make restitution to dear Miss Amabel. He called me up a while ago and told me he had

everything ready to make a settlement to me this forenoon. You may tell Miss Broad, when you go to take the dramatic proceeds to her, that she is going to be in precisely the same relation to the income tax as she was before—he will pay back all he had—well, we'd say stolen if it were a nice, dainty word! As it is we'll call it: Diverted from its proper channel."

Tilly amazed the family. In the midst of the shout that this story, told by Mr. Brett with a happy twinkle in his eye, called forth around the table, Tilly jumped up and began to swing her arms madly, high above her head, then around, like a sort of crazy mowing.

"I'm so glad, I am so glad!" she chanted wildly. "I couldn't stand it to have Miss Broad poor and bearing it so saintly! I couldn't STAND it! I was going to get mumsy to let me work for her, housework now, and earn money when I got bigger. Now I won't have to, but I'd have done it! I couldn't stand it to have Miss Broad poor and have to live in that tenement house, with those children. If she just wanted to, the way it was, I wouldn't mind, but to have to!"

"Why, Tilly, you dear little windmill, I had no idea you loved Miss Broad so well!" cried Mrs. Brett, much pleased by this proof of Tilly's devotion, so well bestowed.

"Well, I do," declared Tilly. "I like people good and quiet, like—like lamps!" Tilly hesitated for a simile, then ended triumphantly.

"We'll go around with the plank right away, shall we, girls?" asked Dins.

"Plank? What does that mean?" inquired Mona.

"The proceeds, the plank for that baby to crawl out of the asylum on," explained Dins.

"I have an idea that baby will not need a plank now; I fancy if Miss Broad has her money restored the baby will fairly fly away from the asylum on the wings of Miss Amabel's rescuing love," said Mrs. Brett.

"Oh, I'm sure of it!" cried Nan. "Miss Broad said she meant to have taken that baby. Just fancy how happy she will be! Hurry up, everybody, with breakfast. Let me telephone Kit and Ham and Gid to be ready; we've got to go in a body. Maybe, now Miss Broad will take the baby, she would rather we gave the money to someone else who needs it; the play money, I mean."

"As long as it stays a plank and someone crawls up out of something bad on it, we don't care who crawls nor what the badness is, do we?" remarked Dins to no one in particular.

Breakfast was hurried; enthusiasm swept each one through it. Even Gussie choked in the general hurry, trying to get through before Jimmy, who never seemed to hurry, but whose steadiness gave him the speed of the famous tortoise.

Peggy begged industriously for biscuit crusts, broken small and well-buttered, losing her balance often, for she was over-weighted for

sitting erect on her hind legs. Then, feeling the preparations for an expedition in the air, she fell to begging as hard to be taken wherever the family might be going.

"Let's make a regular Noah's Ark plank of it!" cried Ailsa, with one of her inspirations. "Let's take Gussie and Peggy——"

"Yes, oh, yes!" shrieked Gussie. "And Middy!"

"Midas is over young and foolish," said Nan. "His hind legs twinkle too much."

"Let's see: let me see 'em twinkle, Nan," implored Gussie, leaning as far over the side of her chair as she could.

Middy was careering around the dining room with a piece of paper he had found. At frequent intervals he stood for an instant on his fore paws and made a queer, convulsive motion with his too-long hind legs, which had the effect of a sort of yellow flash in the air. Nan called this "twinkling his hind legs." Middy was growing big, but sweeter; a very affectionate, yet playful little person, and his broad yellow bands and circles were most effective on his ashen yellow sides.

"Let me take Middy in my doll carriage and let his twinkling legs hang over," proposed Gussie with a chuckle, straightening herself.

"We'll leave Amanda and Middy to welcome us, but we'll take Peggy in her coatie-coat," Tilly settled it.

Peggy seemed to understand; she "talked with her lip caught up and her eyes rolling side-

ways at her audience. At times she broke into a sharp bark as her emotions mastered her at the thought that there still might be a misunderstanding about her going. After breakfast the delegation set forth. Nan had shortened her own meal to call up the other members of the Dramatic Association and insure their joining the Brett delegation. Tilly made Peggy ready in her dark broadcloth overcoat, bound with tan braid, which blended remarkably into the complexion of its wearer; it had a tan leather strap and a buckle to hold it in place around the little body that honesty would pronounce a trifle too rotund.

Mrs. Brett regretfully stayed at home. "I'd love to go with you, children, but it's all your mission and I'm not going to spoil it by taking part of the attention. Besides, I've too much to do to go," she declared, waving her hands in farewell.

"You're always too busy, so it wouldn't matter if you went, because you are always too busy," said Nan with much reason.

Tilly snatched Peggy off her feet and held her up. The little dog waved both her paws, "just the way mumsy was doing," Jimmy said. Peggy waved and waved in jerks, making a tremendous effort to conquer her shortness of breath and limb.

"If mumsy won't go, we might as well start," said Tilly, in a fever to be off.

Spring was getting foretold by the air; its coming was clearly perceptible to-day.

The young people remarked upon it jubilantly, till Nan sobered them by saying:

"I don't want spring to come this year; I wish we could turn back to October. Ailsa will go away this spring."

"Oh, jiminy junkets, head her off!" cried Gidd, so fervently that the rest laughed, though their faces were still clouded by the nearing prospect of losing the Brett's little aunt.

" 'Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof,' " quoted Ailsa. "I don't like the idea of leaving Renwyck, but I'm not going just yet. I don't believe in getting dismal till you must! To think that last spring I hardly knew there was a Renwyck and didn't know or think any more about my little Brett neices and nephews than about extinct animals in the Natural History museum!"

"Not a nice comparison, Auntie dear. My maiden aunt Ailsa is not as respectful to me as she should be to a nephew older than herself," observed Dins.

They found Miss Broad in her schoolroom, that queer, delightful schoolroom, in which no pupil could afford tuition, and no hard and fast rules obtained. The chubby children incredibly scoured and shining, clustered around her knees and she was teaching them with scant reference to the book that lay open in the best position for the majority to see its pages; not nearly all of the children could refer to it, but that did not matter.

Miss Broad looked older, tired, patient, yet

peaceful. The fine, plain, beautiful face was thinner, though it had always been thin, and that the dark, glossy hair was streaked with gray was more apparent, perhaps because Miss Broad was dressed in the same shade of iron gray that her hair was assuming and the hair was brushed so smooth.

"How delightful to see you, dear young folk!" cried Miss Broad, starting up with unfeigned pleasure as she espied the Dramatic Association through the door that the warmth of the day had made her set ajar. "Come in, quickly, and wake us all up, little and big! Dear mites, these are the girls and boys who gave us our Christmas frolic. Tell them you are glad they came to see you."

"Glad you came to see us," chorused the shrill, sweet baby voices, the greeting varied by one voice, higher than the others, shouting: "Glad we came to see you."

"It doesn't matter," laughed Miss Broad. "What are we to do for you to-day, to entertain you? Or are you going to entertain us, as you can so well?"

"We came," began Nan, and stopped, glancing at the others.

"Go on, boys. Dins you be spokesman," said Ailsa.

"We had a play, Miss Broad," said Dins, scowling with absent-minded sincerity upon Ailsa, for he did not care to make a speech. "We got up a play for the orphan baby you told us about, that would go to an asylum. We

called the play: 'The Romany Duchess,' and we sold tickets for it. It was rather a success.'

"It was decidedly a success, Dinsmore: I was there," said Miss Broad.

"That's right!" cried Ham. "I saw you. They gave you a chair too low and straight, then they changed it."

" 'They made her a grave too cold and damp for a heart so young and so true,' " murmured Dins. The Brett house was full of old song books and Dins browsed on them; very frequently and irresistibly repeated themselves at unexpected moments, as now.

"Oh, Dins!" protested Nan, really shocked. "Do go on!"

"We netted sixty dollars, that is we did because father paid a dry goods bill for us, Dins resumed. "We have come to hand it over to you. We thought, or we hoped, it would keep a baby out of an asylum for quite a while. We calculated it would buy about seven hundred quarts of milk.

"Oh, Dins!" sighed Nan again. "When you know we only calculated that for fun!"

"It surely will keep the baby out of an asylum for a while, and we'll hope there may be further good fortune in store for her," said Miss Broad, taking the money with a happy smile. Dins had been to the bank and had got twelve crisp five dollar bills—"to make it at once as bulky as was decent, and yet alluring," he had explained.

"But that isn't all," began Dins over again.

Then he balked. "I'll be switched if I'll tell the rest of it! You girls go on with the story," he said.

"I can't," Nan and Mona and Kit said together. "It must be Ailsa; she can talk."

"Am I so formidable?" laughed Miss Broad.

"No, but it ought to be told you in just the right way, because we shall probably never have another chance to tell anything so good," exclaimed Ailsa. "Dear Miss Broad, my brother and sister, as well as all of us younger ones, felt dreadfully to know your money had been—lost? Gus calls it something else! But we couldn't do anything but feel sorry, except Gus; he could and he did. Oh, Miss Broad, he's got it all back for you; Gus, my brother, has! The man has paid it all back. Gus said, we must tell you that you were—oh, how did he say that? Well, that the income tax affected you exactly as it did before! He has got it all back, every cent. Oh, dear, dear Miss Broad, we're all nearly crazy, we're so glad! We wouldn't be so glad, maybe, if you hadn't been so heavenly about it! We just couldn't stand it to see you so patient and contented when you had been cheated!"

Miss Broad had turned so pale that some of the older and more observing of her little pupils began to whimper, taking fright. Miss Broad had not moved or spoken, but this puppyish subdued whimpering aroused her. She bent over to comfort the children—and the girls noticed that it needed no more than the re-

assuring touch of her hand to still the frightened babies—and at the same time she turned her brimming eyes and smiling face upon her visitors.

"Dear hearts, do you think anything that I could say would be adequate? Will you tell your father, Nan, tell Ailsa's brother, to try to interpret for me? I can't, I never can say what I feel! Oh, dear children, I am so glad, so glad and thankful!"

Saying which Miss Amabel Broad broke into soft sobbing till all the little pupils fell to crying with her, so she had to stop and make them all smile again.

"Don't you know what this means?" asked Miss Broad then.

The Dramatic Association felt sure that it did, but it waited for Miss Broad to explain.

"It means that the little baby shall never go to an asylum; it means that I shall take her for my very own," cried Miss Broad ecstatically. "Oh, my dears, that was the hardest part of my finances going wrong when they did: I wanted so much, for the sake of the baby and myself, to take that little bereft life and make it full and happy!"

"Well, she's a lucky kid!" said Ham, with so much fervor that it sounded respectful.

"Shall we all go to see her?" cried Miss Broad, starting up with girlishness that no one of her visitors had suspected hidden within her. "I feel as though I must hurry to her and tell her our good fortune, our God-given chance, though

she is such a wee mite. She's a dear little wee mite, girls; you'll love her. Shall we go?"

"We'd like to, Miss Broad," came the reply in a sincere chorus, with eager emphasis on the part of Tilly and Gussie. The boys pardonably doubted their enjoyment of a visit upon a young baby, but they kept their misgivings to themselves.

"Mayn't I show the children Peggy first?" asked Tilly. "She's been wiggling something awful under my coat. I'd like to take her out and show her, if you don't mind."

So wiggling Peggy, who had been hidden all this time under Tilly's coat, in the darkest rear of the room, was brought forth and hailed rapturously by the kindergarten. When she was put through her accomplishments and sat up in the middle of the floor waving her fore paws and begging for "cakie," it quite overcame the school.

"Oh, let's us keep her forever'n ever jes' a-sittin' up an' pwayin'!" implored one of the twins, voicing the sentiments of the whole.

"Peggy must go home, babies, and so may you now. We'll be dismissed and have a vacation. Come to-morrow bright and early. Miss Broad has a kind of birthday to-day, so there'll be no more work. Gather up your toys and books and paper, and don't forget your beautiful new pencils! Then march and march and march away home!" cried Miss Broad. Her happy voice was so infectious that Peggy's most covetous admirer broke into smiles and all the

round little, plump little bodies began to roll out of their chairs and get into line.

Once more, as at Christmas, Ailsa played a gay little march and the children went away to its tune. They had been taught the prettiest little farewell, an old fashioned, bobbing curtsey to their best friend, and as they bent their uncertainly balanced bodies to Miss Broad to-day they included the guests in the salutation with rolling of bright eyes; head-turnings being far too risky in such a difficult feat as curtsey dropping.

"The baby is not far away," said Miss Broad, putting on her simple black hat without a glance at the glass, supposed to be used to insure that hat's straightness.

"There is a good woman taking care of her near by. She would gladly keep her, but she cannot afford such a luxury as a small girl. How delighted she will be to know I may have her after all!"

She led the way down the street; the small houses had an irruption of heads all along to see the band of young folk with her; a band so much larger and better dressed than Miss Broad's customary comrades.

Miss Broad turned the corner of the next, similar street, and paused before a low gate. "This is the house," she said.

A woman within had evidently seen them coming, for she had the door open before Miss Broad reached it. She smiled a smile that seemed to light up her thin face, with the high cheek bones;

in the hollow of her left arm she held a baby—THE baby!

"Come right in," said the woman, but Miss Broad stopped her and took the baby from her, saying in a voice tremulous with hungry mother-love:

"Come here, little daughter."

That was all, but the woman turned upon Miss Broad excitedly. "What's happened?" she demanded.

"Mr. Brett, the father of these five children, has recovered my property and I can take the baby," replied Miss Broad simply.

The woman sat down hastily on the stairs. "Praises be!" she cried. "My land, I don't know which to be gladdest for, you or her!"

"No," agreed Miss Broad. "It seems to be all one."

"Well, I'd give something to keep her myself, but I never could, and she wouldn't be near so well-off, if I could. Think of the education and trainin' she'll have, as well 's food'n raiment! But I declare to goodness, there couldn't be a dearer baby, an', if she isn't bigger 'n a minute, she makes you feel she's a perfect lady! I do honest believe she'll be a crown'n reward to you, Miss Broad dear," cried the good woman.

"I know she will, my one desire is to be all that I should be to her," returned Miss Broad. "Let us take her into the other room; I want to display her to these young people. Now, my dears, is she not a lovely little petal?" Miss

Broad seated herself on one of the straight hair-cloth chairs which constituted the penitential glory of the "best room," and set the baby, smoothed and enhanced by Miss Broad's black-sleeved arm, before her visitors to the best advantage.

The baby had soft brown hair that lay like moss on her head and turned into golden lustred rings over her ears and in the back of her neck. The ears thus adorned were perfectly formed, as were the tiny hands which this small personage aimlessly extended. The baby mouth was curved and delicate; the absurd nose already showed intention to be straight and fine; a pair of eyes, as brown and dewy as a fawn's, looked out under a straight little line of eyebrows. The girls went down before her, literally and figuratively; they fell on their knees around Miss Broad and chanted a paean.

"I never, never saw such a lovely baby!" cried Nan.

"No one ever did," said Mona.

"Well," said Kit, "I never have seen much to rave over in babies as little as this one but I'd go crazy and eat her up if I looked at her long."

"The little brown seal!" said Ailsa, while Tilly and Gussie kissed the two baby hands.

"Just that, Ailsa; a little soft-eyed seal, the seal on my happiness and the meaning of my life," said Miss Broad. "Boys, you haven't said anything."

"No chance," said Ham with a grin.

"And no use," supplemented Dins. "I con-

sider myself a connoozer of babies, having been the oldest of five, but I've never seen one that was a patch on this lady. She's the peachiest sort of a peach."

"We never heard her name," said Ailsa suddenly.

"She was baptised Mary," said Miss Broad. "'I am glad, not only because it is the sweet name it is, but because it is your mother's name, Brett children, and if your father had not befriended us, probably the blossom and I could not have had each other. But I shall add Carita to her, for she is to be Love, my little love and I shall like to call her that. Carita Mary—yes, that is it! Carita Mary Broad. I wish Broad were not so absurd! Yet, on second thought, I don't know. Carita Broad—broad love! After all that sounds like a good omen."

The baby looked up unexpectedly and uttered a soft note, the first sound that she had made. Then she laughed, with a funny twist of her little lips, and tipped backward on the encircling arm, so that her downy head rested in its hollow.

"She accepts the omen and promises to make good!" Miss Broad interpreted, bending to kiss the baby's forehead. "Dear children, tell your father how happy I am!"

"Indeed we will, Miss Amabel. He and mother will be almost as happy as you are," cried Nan.

"I'll tell you what it is, they minded like everything having you poor," declared Tilly.

"It wouldn't have mattered, but for this,"

said Miss Broad, drawing the baby closer. "When may I take her, Mrs. Carey?"

"I guess that's for you to say," replied the good woman who had taken care of the baby. "I declare to goodness I'm goin' to hate like everything to give her up, glad's I am about it!" Her face worked and she bent over to pull out one of the baby's ruffles.

"Mrs. Carey, don't you think I'd better take you too?" asked Miss Broad, with one of her whimsical smiles. "You've nothing to hold you here. I shall want to keep on with my little kindergarten. Come to me and take care of Carita! Will you?"

"Oh, Miss Broad," cried Mrs. Carey, turning a purplish red. "And to think you hadn't an idea that I couldn't keep on payin' rent, anyhow!" Which was a queer way to accept the offer, but was clearly an acceptance.

"Mrs. Carey has an invalid sister to support, bed-ridden," explained Miss Broad to the young people. "Another sister looks after her, but this one has to supply the means of livelihood. Dear Dramatic Association, baby Carita does not need that sixty dollars, now that I have enough for us both; would you approve of giving it to Mrs. Carey for her invalid?"

"Sure thing!" shouted Dins, supported by the two other boys.

"What a splendid suggestion!" cried Ailsa.

"I suppose we could go around to every house and explain to the people who bought tickets

why we used the money for something else," said conscientious Nan.

"No one will mind, dear; the tickets would have been bought whatever purpose you had selected to benefit," said Miss Broad. "Why did you peep at your watch slyly, Kitty? Are you making yourselves late?"

"I have to go home," said Kitty. "I was to have spent the day away, but mamma had a headache; she told me to be early to lunch, that we might go afterward, if she were better. The rest needn't come."

"Oh, yes; we have to go, too," said Nan. "Good bye, little lambkin, you dearest of babies!" Will you let us have a wee share in her, Miss Broad, just a little share?"

"All you can absorb," consented Miss Broad. "She will not be truly Clarita unless she can be divided and never lose anything."

Mrs. Carey, who had been quietly crying because of her unforeseen rescue from trouble, let the Dramatic Association out; Miss Broad lingered in the little house with her treasure.

No one spoke for a long time on the way home. Then Nan spoke out of the silence which had been filled with thoughts of what they had all been seeing and feeling. "Rich or poor, whatever happens to her, Miss Amabel is just nothing on this earth but an example. She's a saint and that's all there is about it! Did you notice when she heard that daddy had got that money back the only thing she thought of was that

now she could look after that darling little, lonesome baby?"

"Of course we did," said Ailsa. "She may call the baby Clarita and there couldn't be a more real little Love, but Miss Broad wasn't named Amabel for nothing! She's lovable and beloved fast enough! I'd rather be that plain, lonely, elderly woman than anyone I ever saw, unless it were Molly-Mary."

CHAPTER XVI

"WHAT, AILSA BRETT!"

"This has been a very improving winter," announced Ailsa. She was sitting alone with her sister-in-law, mending Gussie's stockings which wore at the knees, and not in the feet. Consequently it was such a compliment to her darning to be allowed to repair these prominent holes that it modified the tedium of the task.

"What has improved in it?" laughed Mrs. Brett, though she knew what Ailsa meant.

"I have, or at least I've seen how to improve," replied Ailsa promptly. "What do the Scotch mean by talking about studying 'the humanities,' Molly-Mary?"

"The classics, Latin and Latin literature. The term survives the ages when learning was divided into theology, divine learning, and human, secular learning, hence called the humanities. What set you off on that, Ailsa the Unexpected?" asked Mrs. Brett.

"You're nice, Molly-Mary! You are playful and busy, yet you do know things," said Ailsa with profound satisfaction. "The word is always in Scotch stories—'the humanities' is what the village people always say the boy is going to study in 'Glasca.' What put it into my head? Oh, that's what I've been studying; that's all. Only I didn't mean Latin.

"Ailsa, I can follow your remarks, but it makes me downright conceited to do so! You are surely wandering!" cried Ailsa's Molly-Mary.

"Human things—and people," persisted Ailsa. "That's what I've been studying. And I've learned heaps. There is that lovely Miss Broad—I never knew anyone like her before. Just as peaceful when she had lost all she had, just as ready to give up her fine home and be contented among the poor—and she is so fond of everything beautiful, too; a real aristocrat!"

"That's it, Ailsa: a REAL aristocrat, not an imitation! That's one point, and another is that Miss Broad has a vital, living faith that everything that comes to her is sent to her, and she takes all the events of her life as part of the gifts and plan of Love. Comparatively few people really feel this, though a good many profess to believe it. Do you see what a difference really believing it would make?" suggested Mrs. Brett

"Oh, I see, Molly-Mary!" cried Ailsa. "It's the seeing that I mean has made this winter so improving. And then this happy-go-lucky household, everybody as jolly as a grig, having a good time all the time, in the nicest ways there are and not seeming to care anything at all about money! You are as busy as you can be, with five children and only Amanda, and you train up the children to help you, but you play with them and we are all as happy as people can be! You never care a speck about forms or

show, yet you are more particular about the children's friends than any other mother I know—only they are not chosen for their clothes, nor the houses they live in!"

"Well, but, Ailsa dear——" began Mrs. Brett.

"Now, Molly-Mary, I know! But it isn't so that any good mother feels this way, or at least women who are supposed to be good mothers!" cried Ailsa. "I think lots of them would say you were wrong, that you ought to be ambitious for your children. I see who is right! It's the best thing that ever happened to me to have come here! Molly-Mary, you don't quite know how much the people I've lived with care about just what you think doesn't matter! I never took to fuss and feathers, but that was because I loved to read and those things didn't interest me. Maybe if I hadn't come here I should have wakened and begun to push and pull and bother, been a society woman, like mamma. I do mean to know how to entertain and do what belongs to me to do—you entertain beautifully, Molly-Mary! I think probably it's because you aren't trying to get at anything for yourself, and so you make it fine for everybody else. But I don't want to be just a society woman. You've shown me what I would like to be!"

"Little Ailsa, darling, that's a long speech and a hard one to answer!" cried Mrs. Brett. "Your brother is not rich. Perhaps if I had as

much wealth as your mother I should love it too."

"You know you wouldn't!" cried Ailsa, shaking her head hard. "Loving money is loving it. If you haven't it you're squirming and worrying and getting cross because somebody else has, and if you have it you lean right down hard on it and think what it buys and what you can do with it is the greatest thing in the world! That's loving it! You'd never love it, Molly-Mary."

"No, dear, I shouldn't be a money-lover. I truly think. But if you are not one, so it doesn't clog your soul and mind, then it is nice to have money. It's like all material things, Ailsa; desirable to use, but not to serve. I could use more," said Molly-Mary, candidly, with a half-sigh as she surveyed a tear in Jimmy's second-best knickerbockers that meant many stitches and a perfectly visible darn after they were set.

"There's something I want to tell you, but I suppose I must wait a little longer—I've waited so long!" Ailsa's sigh was more unmistakable than her sister-in-laws.

"What ails a Brett?" inquired Dins, entering. "How's that for cleverness, Auntie? I did it; that's my discovery! Do you see it? What ails a Brett? Equal to: What, Ailsa Brett! Or merely a question: What Ailsa Brett?—though there never would be two of you. Isn't it brilliant. Here's a letter for you." Dins tossed a letter into Ailsa s lap.

"May I read it, Molly-Mary? It's from mamma," said Ailsa, anticipating permission by

slitting the envelope with her darning needle.

Ailsa read her letter, which was not long, with a face that betrayed several emotions, surprise dominating. She paused over the signature, frowning at it thoughtfully.

"Mamma is coming to Renwyck," she announced, looking up at her sister-in-law.

"To take you home?" cried Dins.

"Oh, I never thought of that! Most likely she will want me to go back with her. But I think it is business that has brought her. She says she will be here by Friday and I am to engage rooms for her at the best hotel in town and meet her at the station to take her there, Molly-Mary," said Ailsa.

"Oh, no—must you do that?" cried Molly-Mary. "Don't you think she will be comfortable in this house? I should be sorry to have your mother, Gus's father's wife, stay at a hotel when she came to Renwyck for the first time."

"Of course she would be comfortable here: your guest room is so big and yet cozy but——" Ailsa stopped. She did not know how to suggest that her mother and her sister-in-law were strangers to each other and that her fashionable mother would not fit well into this easy-going household's simple ways.

"I understand the 'but,' Ailie, dear, but—there's another one! I really think the wisest thing to do in this world is to ignore buts! Suppose you tell your mother that your brother and sister—I can answer for Gus—beg her to

come straight to them and that they owe her a great deal for lending them little Aunt Ailsa," said Mrs. Brett.

"Oh, you dearest!" cried Ailsa, jumping up to hug her Molly-Mary. "Yes, I'll write my mother just what you say. I think you mean that it is right to do what is right and kind, and then if the other one doesn't enjoy it——" Ailsa broke off with one of her expressive gestures to signify the blame would rest elsewhere.

It was thrilling to the younger Bretts to know that Ailsa's mother was coming. Nan never had lost her admiration for the regal figure, in its beautiful garments which stood photographed on Ailsa's dresser. She was half timid, half delighted in the prospect of entertaining this fine lady in the flesh, beneath the home roof. Dins dreaded her coming and showed it, though he rigidly repressed all comment that might trouble Ailsa. Tilly was frankly jubilant and curious; Gussie shared these feelings, while Jimmy merely said: "It won't be polite to read when she's in the room, will it? I'll go up stairs; it won't matter. What'll we call her?"

This question was so difficult to answer that the young Bretts referred it to their father.

"Mrs. Brett, I think," he said.

"Then she mustn't be any relation, only just stiff company," said little Gussie, her warm impulses chilled by this information.

Mr. Brett and Ailsa went to meet the expected "stiff company"; there had been no time for Mrs. Brett to object to the arrangement made

for her visit to Renwyck, had she wished to do so. The Brett family awaited their return with considerable lowness of spirits, that is the younger ones seemed downcast. Mrs. Brett—who was deposed to the rank of "Mrs. Augustus," now that the elder Mrs. Brett was on the scene, hummed as she hurried through the last touches of her toilet; if she dreaded the other Mrs. Brett, who was too near her own age to be called "the elder Mrs. Brett," the dread did not appear. Nor did Amanda seem perturbed: she rolled through her tasks in her ordinary portly calm. Amanda considered that when her best was done and the faithful soul did her best steadily—the results were out of her hands.

When the carriage that brought the expected guest under escort from the station stopped at the Brett door, "Molly-Mary" had it wide open and was smiling a welcome in the frame of its casement. Mr. Brett handed a tall lady out of the carriage. The children were peeping curiously behind the curtains upstairs. They saw her gowned in the last perfection of the hour, in style and texture. She wore a hat with a floating veil, high heeled pumps, and she carried a bag that instantly filled Nan's eyes to temporary blindness to all else. She knew in a moment that within so fine a bag must be hidden entrancing appointments for which she had a young girl's natural desire. The face lifted to the windows—from which the young Brett's hastily stepped back—was handsome

and looked young, not with the fresh bloom of their mother's sweet face, but with the deliberate youth of a society woman. And it was handsome, cold, but handsome; handsomer than the picture, as Nan whispered to Dins, who shook his head. Mrs. Brett did not attract him.

"How do you do, Mrs. Brett," they heard the new arrival saying in silvery, high notes, carefully modulated. "How good of you to insist upon my coming here! I hope I shall not be a nuisance! I will try to efface myself. It was charming of you, but you should not have done it, really! I've no doubt I should have been perfectly comfortable at an inn. My stay will be brief. It was so good of you, really! Augustus, I have a steamer trunk somewhere in your town; it will arrive by and by, before too long, I hope? Ailsa will attend to my wants, till my trunk comes, thank you. Oh, please not the young people till dinner! I should be so glad to rest in my room till my trunk comes, if you don't mind. Train travel is weary work; there was no Pullman on the last part of the journey. I detest the common coaches, don't you? I have a negligee in my bag, thanks. Where is my bag? Oh, you have it, Ailsa! Very well; will you take your mother to her room? Thanks, Mrs. Brett, no; I shall do perfectly with Ailsa alone, thanks. She has been accustomed to acting as my maid at a pinch since her childhood. Shocking how she is growing up! She looks well, really, better

than when I sent her away. You have given her a look of health, and, really, she is prettier! Isn't it frightful to have one's daughter growing up? I forgot; your son is older than Ailsa, Mrs. Brett! But sons don't matter so much, do they? They are rather becoming, when they are tall and stalwart, and the mother is young, but a grown daughter——" Mrs. Brett's voice broke off in an expressive pause. "Till dinner, then! I suppose you rest, too, at this hour? Ailsa tells me you are a marvel of industry! So am I, really; I am perfectly inundated with social duties and public ones. I am interested in so many of the movements of the day! Yes, I shall rest nicely, I am sure. Thanks."

The young people heard the swish of soft silken garments in the hall, passing the closed door behind which they huddled. Presently Ailsa was scurrying about, fetching hot water, then a shawl from her own room, then a cup of tea and a biscuit from down stairs, finally there was quiet, but for the murmer of Ailsa's voice, broken by a sharp question at intervals from her mother, and at last, silence, indicating that the traveler was resting. The younger Bretts stole down stairs, a greatly subdued and considerably depressed group.

They were presented to Ailsa's mother at dinner. The steamer trunk had arrived in the interval and Mrs. Brett appeared in a gown of wonderful description which made their own Mrs. Brett's gown look painfully inadequate—yet after all more in keeping with the homelike

dining room, the table ringed about with young faces and the simple, delicious dinner which Amanda had cooked.

The new Mrs. Brett saluted each of the children pleasantly, said a few words in that aloof attempt at interest which is the best that a great many people can do toward making acquaintance with the next generation, and immediately and evidently forgot them.

"I have come to bear Ailsa away," Mrs. Brett announced, after dinner in the drawing room. Nan started, the other looked gloomy, and Ailsa's mother smiled at Nan.

"You looked flatteringly shocked, my dear," she said. "How nice that you will miss my girl! I know that she will miss you. Indeed, I am afraid that she will hardly be ready to leave you, but I have a tempting bait to offer! Ailsa, I am going to take you to Europe!"

"Are you going abroad?" asked Ailsa, to gain time. Her face was flushed, she looked ready to cry.

"And you with me." Her mother nodded pleasantly. "It is absolutely necessary, a part of education, and my poor Ailsa has slipped through a great deal else that should have been in her early training. I shall travel slowly all summer and probably settle down for the winter in Paris. Ailsa will enjoy it all, but it will give her far more than mere pleasure. What is this about the pink glaze china, Augustus?" she demanded unexpectedly.

"About the—" Mr. Brett began to question,

but stopped, with a puzzled glance at his wife.

"Ailsa has written me many times in regard to it," Mrs. Brett went on. "I have come here partly because of it, that, and the matters relating to Ailsa's guardianship, on which we have corresponded. Do you think, really, that owning the main part of that old china gives you a claim upon my husband's estate?"

"I am entirely in the dark, Mrs. Brett; I have not the faintest idea what you mean," said Mr. Brett, and Molly-Mary looked at Ailsa for enlightenment.

"Is it possible that Ailsa has not told you? Ailsa, have you not spoken of this absurd quixotic notion of yours to your relatives here?" demanded Mrs. Brett.

"No, mother," said Ailsa. "But it isn't absurd."

"May Ailsa tell us about it now?" suggested Molly-Mary.

"It was the day we were mending china, Molly-Mary; the day so long ago when little Gussie fell ill," said Ailsa. "You showed me the pink glaze china, you remember? And you told me the story of it. Then I knew what my father had meant; little as I was, I never forgot what he said to me just before he died. It was such a strange thing to say; I couldn't understand one bit what he meant, and so I never forgot. I puzzled over it as I grew older. Father said: 'Little Ailsa, see that the pink glaze china goes with the rest of the set. There's a spell about it. And be sure you say to your

mother than ten thousand dollars goes with it. It is his. Tell him I'm sorry, I'm sorry not to see him. When you're old enough, see to it that the pink glaze goes with the rest and ten thousand dollars to boil water for the tea. Don't forget, little Ailsa, when you're old enough. I meant to do it, I meant to! Ten thousand to boil water for his tea, and my love."

In the complete silence that followed Ailsa's tremulous recital of her story a log fell apart in the fireplace. Gussie jumped, then ran to be taken up into her mother's lap, feeling, without understanding, that there was something grave in the air.

"You will see, Augustus, that this is absurd; it does not constitute a claim upon me. Your father left you something, but the rest of his property was left in trust to me for his other children; the bulk of it for Ailsa, who was his favorite and the baby." Mrs. Brett's voice had a new sharp ring; it's honeyed sweetness was lacking.

"This is the first time I have heard of this singular legacy, this bequest through a child. I am glad to get my father's message. I, too, have been sorry many times that I could not have seen him before he died. But as to a claim upon you, certainly this would not constitute a legal claim, nor have I the slightest desire to establish one." Mr. Brett spoke slowly; there was emotion in his face and voice.

"I am glad to hear you speak so reasonably," said his step-mother, plainly relieved. "I should

contest anything like an attempt to establish a claim on such ground; it would not hold a moment. On the other hand I am ready to ship to you the rest of that old pink glaze set. It really is a pity to separate it. Few sets survive so many years. I never use my part of it. I will send it to you. But not the money! I'm not going to make you a present of ten thousand dollars, Augustus, really!"

"Certainly not," Mr. Brett was beginning, but Ailsa interrupted him, her voice quivering with excitement, her eyes dark and dilated.

"It is exactly as much yours, Gus, as anything can be!" she cried. "My father said so distinctly. He told me to be sure to remember when I was older, and I do remember, and I want to do what is right. He said he meant to do it himself, that is to give you the money. I didn't know whom he was speaking of; I didn't know what he meant, but I couldn't forget what he said. And it is just as much yours as—as can be!"

"Softly, little sister," said Mr. Brett, putting out his hand and taking Ailsa's burning one. "I don't want the money, believe me. I'd rather it were yours by and by. But I'm truly thankful you did not forget the message. It would not constitute a claim. We don't worry about the money part of it. What a nice story it makes and what a strange one! That old pink glaze china and my father recalling it at the last!"

"I'll certainly see that the pieces I have are

packed and sent to you at once," said Mrs. Brett.

"It is a—what is the word?—a moral claim," said Ailsa, unexpectedly, with great decision. "I've been begging mother to say she'd give you the money. I've been writing and writing."

Mrs. Brett laughed, not pleasantly. "Ailsa is Donna Quixote; she is too young to know the value of what she is so ready to throw away," she said.

"Precisely," said Mr. Brett. "Nor is she old enough to have forgotten the value of honor, which was dear to her father and mine; some people think that honor is more precious than gold, Mrs. Brett. Be comforted, Ailsa, little true sister! I return the money to you; I would not accept it; you would not in my place. Now it is yours in right and truth."

"Oh, Gus, you're ever so much more than half a brother!" cried Ailsa, with a sob. Impetuously she sprang up and dropped on her brother's knee, hiding her face in his shoulder, overpowered with a loneliness that she did not understand, but which came from her sense of lack of sympathy with her own mother and the prospect of being separated from these dear people, who were really her nearest kin, though not closest to her in blood. "As soon as I'm old enough to get it myself I shall give you that money, anyway, and if you won't take it I shall give it to Nan," Ailsa said in her brother's ear.

Mr. Brett patted Ailsa's dark hair in some embarassment, while her mother looked at her

with cold disapproval, and the younger Brett children stared in open amazement. Dins and Nan understood, and were profoundly moved.

"Such a dear girl!" said Mrs. Augustus Brett, hugging Gussie close to her in default of being able to hug Ailsa.

"I can understand your admiration for her childish attitude on this question," Mrs. Brett permitted herself to say. "Ailsa is a dear girl, perhaps, but she is not the kind of girl I hope to make of her. A year abroad will do wonders for her."

"The money which Augustus's father meant for him we shall never take," said Molly-Mary. "But no one could help loving Ailsa for wanting to carry out his wish. I am sure I don't know what we shall do without the child!"

"Don't take me to Europe, mother, please, please don't!" Ailsa implored, slipping from her brother's arm and turning to her mother. "I am learning so much, I am learning so very much! Please, please, let me stay here while you are gone! I know they will keep me. I shall only be a nuisance to you, trailing all over Europe, hating it. Take a maid instead; you'd have to take one anyway, though! Well, do something else; take a pleasant friend. I wouldn't be a comfort to you; I never was. And I'll be better fitted to go later; I'll promise to go later and not say a word. Maybe by that time they'll have found the Mona Lisa and I can see it. You wouldn't care to have me miss such a famous picture, would you, mother?"

The Bretts burst out laughing at this, but Ailsa's mother saw nothing funny in it.

"Ailsa, to be perfectly truthful, I'm not especially anxious to take you to Europe with me. I think hobbledehoy girls, neither children nor grown up, are, to say the least, tiresome. But you need Europe; it is my duty to give you what advantages lie in my power. I am going myself, therefore you are to go with me," she said.

"Mother, I'll study art till I'm eighteen or twenty, then it will do me more good. I—I shall be wretched if you take me now! Please don't! I'll be seasick on the sea, and homesick on the land, and—Oh, mother, mother, leave me here! I've been so lonely always and didn't know what was wrong! You never cared to have me with you: you always liked committees and clubs better than children. And now I'm happy, and learning what I never knew. Mother, let me stay!"

"It would be a good thing for you to go, Ailsa darling," interposed Molly-Mary softly. "We shall miss you dreadfully, but it may be best for you to go."

"Not now, Molly-Mary; not yet," Ailsa said. "Even you don't know. It will be better to go later. Nan and I will go later!" Ailsa's face lit up with such delight at this inspiration, that it convinced her brother and his wife, and, curiously, disgusted her mother to the point of suddenly abandoning her plan.

"Then stay," she said, fairly taking away

Ailsa's breath, though she was used to her mother's sudden and complete distaste for things for which she had to conquer too great difficulties. "I suppose that I should enjoy the trip better unencumbered. You are wholly a Brett; I have no other child who is so totally unlike me. Pity, for you are clever enough, if you care to be, and you are decidedly going to be pretty. Curious how you Bretts like to talk nonsense, read books, have so little ambition; your father was like that." Mrs. Brett turned to her step-son with an air as if she cast off then and there all responsibility for Ailsa's present eccentricity and its future consequences.

Nan was silently, but enthusiastically, hugging Ailsa in mutual congratulation that she had been miraculously preserved to them. Ailsa herself was too stunned by the unexpected turn of affairs to realize fully that they had turned. But she knew that she was profoundly glad and thankful, thankful even more than glad, that she was to stay in this happy home-life where true standards were held, and where this solitary youngest child of a thoroughly worldly woman was learning the best things in life. Time enough for Europe half a century later, if need were, but no time to learn to be a true, sweet, useful woman if it were not done now. And, young as she was, Ailsa knew this. More than that, she was so happy, so utterly content and happy in this home life that she had drifted into!

"Perhaps if we are to talk over business mat-

ters it would be well to do so now, Augustus," Mrs. Brett said coldly. "You have been dissatisfied with my management and have not hesitated to say so. Of course, as Ailsa's guardian, you have a right—"

"Mrs. Brett," interrupted Mr. Brett, "the children are not old enough to hear these things spoken of; our discussions of Ailsa's inheritance concern only ourselves. Will you come with me into the library, please? We can talk there, and I keep my books in the desk in that room."

He arose and held back the portiere for his step-mother to pass. She went out with the soft murmur of her garments, wafting delicate odors, the embodiment of grace and beauty, of elegance, but also of selfish preoccupation.

"Oh, Molly-Mary, how pretty and comfy you look to-night!" said Ailsa, as the curtain dropped behind her mother and brother. "You are so I-don't-know-how pretty and attractive! Just like a hay mow, some way!"

"Ailsa, what a dreadful thing to liken poor me to !" cried Mrs. Brett.

"No, it isn't and you are!" persisted Ailsa. "Soft, fragrant, nourishing, simple, homey—all those things! And a good-for-nothing little dark girl can cuddle right into your heart! You are exactly like a hay mow, Molly-Mary! I'd have died if I had left you!"

"People don't die so easily, little sister, but indeed I'm glad to keep you, Ailie," returned Molly-Mary.

Chapter XVII

"THE HOUSE AUNT"

Ailsa's mother went away after three days. The Bretts tried to make her visit interesting, but they were surprised to discover that there was little in Renwyck to exhibit; the town had always seemed to them full to over-flowing with absorbing events and sights, but when these were to be shown to the sort of person that Ailsa's mother was they proved illusive. Not that Mrs. Brett was not polite; she tried to be thrilled by the new cemetery, with the Soldiers' Shaft in the middle; by the silk and woolen mills at the far end of the town, by the library, the "opera house," the simple drives into the adjoining pleasant, but not impressive country. But one feels it when a guest is "trying" to be thrilled and the enthusiasm of the exhibitor wanes. The family felt that Jimmy implied the opinion of them all when he observed:

"I guess Mrs. Brett will like Europe."

Mrs. Brett had long ago out-grown little everyday places like Renwyck and she had not that rare faculty of seeing everyday places through the enthusiasms of those who love them and live in them.

Ailsa and her mother together were a revelation to the younger Bretts, accustomed to the

close intimacy of their relations with their own mother and their "Daddy Brett."

It was pathetic to Ailsa's brother and sister to see the girl striving to be loving and intimate with a mother who, in her way, meant well by her youngest child. Between them lay the insuperable barrier of the childish years when Ailsa had been left to the care of Deborah Hopewell, the faithful woman who had been given this trust, while the mother was occupied with outside interests; there was no real approach between the mother and her young daughter. Mrs. Brett did not seem to feel this loss: it made Ailsa wistful and dissatisfied; plainly she felt that she was to blame for her failure to draw as close to her mother as she did to Molly-Mary. And yet she could not fail to perceive the great differences that there were between these two mothers. It was a relief to everyone when Mrs. Brett went away, soon to sail for that long European tour from which Ailsa had begged to be released.

None of the young people were told anything about the business matters which had brought Mrs. Brett to Renwyck for conference with her step-son, but it appeared later that Ailsa was to have a considerable allowance and that another winter, when her mother was in Paris, she and Nan were to be sent together to a famous school.

So that summer would be the last, for a while, of the home-life which Ailsa so loved.

"I must make the most of it," Ailsa declared. "I've got to be with Molly-Mary every single

minute, to copy her. I'm going to learn to be exactly like her, or as near as it's in me to come to it, before I get to studying. Because it's like me to love to do clever things and to get all swallowed up in books, and I do want to be a womanly woman."

"You're just going to be a little house aunt," laughed Nan. "Just a little black ant that crawls into our house and sticks to it!"

"Borax and sugar they use to get rid of them, don't they? You might leave out the borax for me—and make the sugar maple, will you?" suggested Ailsa.

"No; I'll use a broom and sweep you out, more fun," said Nan. "Oh, Ailsa, I'm so glad you're to stay! A whole year, and then to begin school with me in the winter—it will be almost like owning you! When it is over I know you'll be my sister by some magic, and not Daddy Brett's! I'm so happy I could fly."

"Two-step instead," advised Ailsa, catching her taller niece around the waist and whirling her down the room at such a mad speed that they could not stop at Peggy, who trotted in at the door at the wrong instant.

There was a yelp and shriek and the two girls fell headlong, while Peggy fled back to Amanda's quarters, her brief tail unkinked, her eyes rolling wildly; doubtless she was convinced that the worst had happened and that the girls, not the dog, had gone mad.

"That was—a loose—Peg," gasped Ailsa, sitting up and rubbing her elbows ruefully.

"It came near being a LOOSE Peg; we might have squashed the dear dumpling!" cried Nan.

Then they both sat and rocked themselves, laughing till they cried. Finally Nan pulled herself up and went out to make her peace with Peggy, having "nearly made pieces of her," she said as she went.

Mrs. Brett came down stairs, humming as she came, short of breath, flushed, her rumpled light hair fluffy and frowsily as usual when she was busy—and she was always busy.

"What happened down here?" she cried. "I heard a dash and then a crash—"

"And you came near hearing, or seeing a mash," Ailsa interrupted her. "Nan and I were two-stepping and Peggy came in and we collided. It was like that Uncle Josh record on the talking machine—don't you know? Where he says he thought he'd do a two step, in the skating rink and he says: "Well, I done it! Just two steps that was all!"

"I hope you didn't damage Peggy-peg!" cried Mrs. Brett. "Ailsa, what is Memorial Day?"

"The holiday on which we decorate soldiers' graves, and now people decorate other graves on that day," replied Ailsa gravely, but her eyes laughed.

"Nonsense, Ailsa Brett; you know quite well I didn't mean that! Now tell me what day it is, properly," commanded Molly-Mary.

"Please, Mrs. Augustus Brett, m'am, it is my birthday," said Ailsa meekly, dropping a curtsey.

"Right, Ailsa Brett, and this year it is your

sixteenth birthday, which is important. What are we to do about it?" said Molly-Mary.

"Pull down the shades and sit all day on the floor, weeping," replied Ailsa promptly.

"I don't want to grow up, that's one reason for keeping the day that way, and another would be that I'm such an unsatisfactory person at sixteen."

"Fishing!" remarked her sister-in-law. "However, we shall not keep it that way! Have you noticed that it is growing warm and summer like?"

"Yes, 'm," said Ailsa. "Haven't you noticed that I put on a thin dress this morning?"

"I have indeed! All of which proves that the time is ripe for the first picnic of the season, to be held on your birthday—doesn't it?" asked Mrs. Brett.

"Molly-Mary, have I ever said I thought well of you? If I haven't I want to say so this instant," said Ailsa with much earnestness, her eyes fairly snapping with joy.

"What's going on?" asked Nan, returning with Peggy in her arms, the small dog's feelings assuaged, her confidence in her friends' sanity restored.

" 'The spring has come, gentle Annie,' " sang her mother, from one of the old song collections which Dins studied so faithfully. "Have you seen how green and pink and white Renwyck is now? and have you noticed how fragrant the air is, how full of sweetness the world, even at the mills end of the town? May

time, girls dear! I find myself dreaming of all sorts of vague lovely things: fairies seem possible! So I am planning one lovely thing—to keep Ailsa's sixteenth birthday, Memorial Day, somehow quite delightfully out of doors."

"Oh, mumsy, there are times when I'm perfectly willing to have you for a mother!" exclaimed Nan, her manner less temperate than her speech. "I can see—would you mind letting Dins and me make up the programme?"

"It is quite dreadful," said Mrs. Brett plaintively. "If I have a brilliant idea, then someone tries to rob me of the glory! Yes, Nan, if you have the heart to spoil my picnic, or to steal it, rather! But please submit your programme to me; I'd like the right of veto."

"Certainly, Mary Brett, dearest, only please just have the right of veto; don't use it," said Nan sweetly.

"I'd like to be consulted in the arrangements for my own birthday; you were in all the plans for yours," said Ailsa.

"But yours are to be surprises," Nan told her. "I never heard of your birthday celebration till just now, but I see it must be a secret. You're to forget you have a birthday, Auntie dear."

Dins and Nan put their heads together; they were to be found chuckling and plotting in whispers at almost any time after this. They enlisted the "outside four," as they had begun to call Kit and Mona, Ham and Giddy, and

Ailsa began to get feverishly curious, but no hint of their plan could she obtain.

"In due time, auntie," was all the satisfaction she got when she implored to be told at least where they were going on the great day.

The early part of May had been cold that year, so the latter part grew rapidly and thoroughly summer-like. The thirtieth fell on Friday, a good day for a holiday, as it frees three consecutive days from school-work and gives almost the sense of having a week of vacation. Mrs. Brett and Amanda were exceedingly busy that week, but, though Ailsa knew they were making good things to eat, she could not find out where they were to be eaten.

"A white dress, Ailie, and a jacket for warmth, that is your necessary equipment," her sister-in-law said. "Be ready at half past eight; we shall make a long day of it."

No fear of the Brett household not being ready at half past eight! Ailsa was awakened before dawn by Peggy barking wildly all down the hall and a sharp cry, which she learned afterward was Middy's protest on being stepped on where he lay, trustfully asleep. Tilly had got up and was crawling downstairs in the hope of finding that her clock and the sun were both wrong, for it was dark and the clock said it was half past three. Unfortunately the dining room clock corroborated Tilly's little swift ticker, and the child had to creep back to bed, having succeeded in waking the household. They all

arose by five and breakfast was out of the way by half past seven.

"Lawsy, Dins boy, it's a good thing you wake up for something! I'd recommend Memoriam days celebrashums 'most any time of yeah, for it 'most fills a body's grave to git you out'n baid when you ain't havin' some such enticements," said Amanda, beaming on the handsome lad, her prime favorite, as he strapped down a basket which "would need a lock and a time fuse to protect it if anybody knew what was in it," Dins said. Amanda was susceptible to praise of her cooking.

At half past eight a wagon drove up to the door. It was filled with straw. It was also partly filled with passengers—Mona, Kit, Ham, Giddy, Miss Broad, baby Carita, in Mrs. Carey's arms, happy Mrs. Carey, who rarely had had pleasure in her life.

Most wonderful of all, at the upper end of the wagon sat four smiling young Italians, two playing violins, one a viola, one a flute and they were making both lively and pretty music when "the chariot," as Jimmy called it, drove up.

The Bretts fairly tumbled out of the house, pushing Ailsa ahead of the others. "Many happy returns of the day!" shouted the wagoners in chorus and the musicians dashed into "Hail to the Chief." This had been Dins' instructions; he could think of nothing more appropriate with which to greet Ailsa on her appearance.



DINS HELPED HER TO HER SEAT WITH DIGNITY, . . . JIMMIE APPEARED IN WHITE ROBES, SUGGESTIVE OF A BISHOP'S

(The Little Aunt) (Page 307)

"Of all things!" gasped Ailsa, really overcome.

"We've all got our own instruments besides!" shouted Jimmy, excited beyond his wont. He produced his ocarina from his pocket to prove that he was ready to swell the volume of sound.

"Pile in, youngsters; Mary, you first!" commanded Mr. Brett. "I've brought my flute, Sweet Sixteen. We are going, in classic phrase, to whoop it up for you all day!"

And they did! When all the Bretts were in the wagon, all but Middy, who could not have borne the noise, but including Peggy and Amanda, and when the baskets were bestowed with the baskets which the outside quartette had brought, the horses started. They proceeded to the strains of music which brought Renwyck children, as they passed, to see if the Memorial Day parade had actually started so early. They drove through the town, not worrying a bit that conventional people marvelled that "Mrs. Brett could bring herself to take part, as she did, in all the children's capers," Mrs. Brett, who had been the chief instigator of the whole thing, and who enjoyed it every bit as much as Gussie, though she did not have to be held own in her enthusiasm like Gussie! They drove out through the town, which receded as they went, diminishing into streets with houses far apart and finally dissolving into grassy fields, green as fields are green in May, only, bordered with trees of tender leafage, melting into soft mist-veiled

browns and purples and yellows of new-clad distances.

The poetry and beauty of spring quieted somewhat the noisy rapture of this party's setting forth. The musicians, with Italian quickness to sympathize with moods and to feel beauty, drifted into softer music, sentimental, wistful.

But when, at last the wagon turned into a road little driven, the result of wood cutter's cart wheels, and reached the picnic's destination, and the picnickers scrambled out of the straw with cries and groans and appeals to be pulled up, the merriment of the beginning returned.

"The question to be decided is whether we are the Hit-or-Miss Club on a picnic, or the Dramatic Association," declared Ham. "If we're musical then we'll have a concert; if we're actors we'll give a play. Which are we, Ailsa? Such questions are up to you today."

"We are both; first one, then the other," Ailsa decided promptly.

"But Ailsa is to be crowned queen of the fete and—though tardily—of the May, first of all," announced Mrs. Brett.

"Well, I will! To think we forgot it!" cried Dins. He offered Ailsa his hand.

"Lady Ailsa, let me lead you to the coronation room," he said.

The musicians struck up a march, the company formed in line behind Ailsa and her es-

cort, they marched around and around, till, suddenly, Dins dove under some over-hanging branches and Ailsa uttered a cry of pleasure at what was revealed on the other side. A small space of rocky, moss-grown table land it was, framed in a circle of pines, whose needles had at once carpeted the ground and cleared it of vegetation. At one side of this circle there arose a throne of pine boughs and young maples. The throne was decorated with branches of bright wild azalea, shading from light red, through soft pinks to blush white. It was a throne beautiful enough for any queen and the sixteen-year old monarch who was to ascend it was delighted.

Dins helped her to her seat with dignity. After she had assumed it Jimmy appeared in white robes, distantly suggestive of a bishop's, and marched toward the throne. From behind it appeared Gussie in page costume bearing a crown of flowers on a pillow. Jimmy took the crown and ascended to the throne. Ailsa bent her head and Jimmy crowned her, saying:

"I crown you sovereign of us all and queen of the day and of the May. Reign over us till flowers and Maytime are not sweet. That means forever," Jimmy hastily explained. Mumsy made up the coronation."

After which the musicians played and everybody sang, patriotic airs, familiar old, beloved songs till they could recall no more and were too tired to want to.

"Now, if the queen approves, I think her

subjects could be nourished," hinted Mrs. Brett.

The hint needed no underscoring. The entire court hurried through the branch-screened opening to the throne room and unpacked baskets. Amanda was in her element; she proudly brought forth what looked like enough delicious food for a shipwrecked crew whose chance of being rescued was small. Amanda looked critically at other people's concoctions; in her heart she felt sure that her own excelled them all.

Peggy sat up begging ceaselessly, but nobody noticed her; they were all too busy and excited improvising tables and spreading them.

There was not too much to eat! It was incredible, but true! Mr. Brett made the coffee; he had learned in old camping days, so he insisted that his was the only coffee appropriate to a picnic in the woods. At the last moment a freezer of ice cream, which had been hidden beside the driver of the wagon, was brought forth to "trim the cap of the climax," Ailsa said.

It was a rapturous as well as a delicious feast. After it was over, for an hour the party sat and lay on the ground, telling stories, resting, playing with baby Carita, who was developing into an exquisite "petal," as her adopted mother called her; a serene, sweet, lovable baby, friendly to the world and all in it. She was handed about like a sort of exotic dessert after dinner and enjoyed each one's petting, most

of all big black Amanda's, who had her race's instinct for a baby's likings.

"Nan and I have invented a new game," announced Dins, when everybody was sufficiently rested. "It is called The Woodchuck. Each of us is given a square of ground, about two feet, and we are all to dig in it. At the end of a certain time—fifteen minutes, we thought—time will be called and we're to announce what we've found in our plantation. The one who finds the most is given a prize. It's rather like that game of seeing who can remember the greatest number of objects on a table in a certain time. This game is sort of nature study—stones of different kinds count, so do bugs and such cattle, flowers, of course. Who'll try?"

Everybody was ready to try it, either because it appealed to him, or to be amiable. Dins and Giddy measured off two square feet of land for every contestant. Ailsa was appointed a patch so rocky that there was good natured protest all around.

"What can Ailsa find in a heap of stones?" cried Tilly. "You change with me, Ailsa; I've got a perfect pudding of a place; easiest thing in the world to dig!"

"No, each one must keep what falls to him—or her—that's part of the game. Besides, you don't know whether there are plums in your pudding or not, Tilly. That's part of the fun, too; take your luck, and, if it's bad luck be

clever enough to turn it into good," said Mrs. Brett, who was, of course, in the secret.

At a signal the whole party was on its knees grubbing like the small animal for which the game was named. Ailsa dug out her rocks. She went at them with a mind made up to fearful efforts; instead she found that all she had to do was to roll the rocks away; a task easily performed with one hand. They had been recently displaced! She looked up, suspecting a hoax; the rest were all sitting back on their heels, not digging a bit, but watching her with intense enjoyment. Beneath the lightly strewn soil, below the displaced rocks Ailsa saw white edges—boxes and wrapping paper! Then she knew! It was her birthday and this was the way those conspiring Dins and Nan had chosen to get her presents to her!

Ailsa brushed away the earth and pulled out packages and more packages. When they were all brought forth Ailsa gathered them up into her lap, pulled off the gloves with which she had protected her hands and went over to a shady place to open them, while Tilly and Gussie and Jimmy hopped up and down before her, the older ones were not less impatient in a quieter way.

There would be no use in trying to tell what Ailsa had found in her territory! It was a lucky thing for the others that it was not a game, after all, for no one else would have had a chance at the prize. Books, ties, small jewelry, sachets, toilet articles, bags, candy,

pretty things for embroidery, everything that a girl of sixteen loves, appeared out of the wrappings of the buried treasures which Ailsa had exhumed. And there was a letter from her mother which she slipped, unread, into the breast of her blouse.

"Now the day is over," said Mrs. Brett at last, after Ailsa had exhausted her powers of expressing her rapture and had still left it unexpressed.

"We must drive home. Gather up the camp; come, children; come, Peggy!"

The empty baskets were thrown into the wagon, the minstrels followed them and the picnickers scrambled in, helter skelter, to the wildest of tarantellas, which the Italians played with their dark eyes laughing and their white teeth gleaming at the fun.

The horses better approved the drive homeward than the drive out of town in the morning; they trotted back fast, and the music behind them never ceased for a moment. The Hit-or-Miss Club played with the Italians, the girls sang, so did Miss Broad and Mrs. Brett—no wonder Renwyck hurried to see what was passing when they got within the town boundaries again!

"Such a beautiful, beautiful birthday!" cried Ailsa from the steps, waving farewell to the friends in the wagon who were to be conveyed to their own homes.

"It is a memorable day, as well as Memorial

Day!" cried Miss Broad, making baby Carita wave good-bye.

"Three cheers for Mr. and Mrs. Brett!" cried Ham, standing up in the middle of the cart, and the cheers were given with emphasis.

"Many happy returns, Ailsa!" called back the young people as they rolled away.

CHAPTER XVIII

A POSTSCRIPT

"Molly-Mary," said Ailsa, coming into her sister-in-law's room at sunset that night. "I had a letter from mamma.''

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Brett, sitting down by the window. Ailsa's tone showed her that there was something more than usual to be told her. "And, Ailsa, she has sent the few pieces of the pink glaze set that we lacked, the box is down stairs now; Dins is to unpack it."

"I know; mother said she had sent it. She has done more than that," Ailsa trembled with joy. "Listen to my letter, Molly-Mary! All the first part of it is about her going abroad and my birthday; she has sent me a ring that I always loved, an emerald, for my birthmonth: it was mamma's when she was my age. But the main part of the letter is the postscript. Do listen, Molly-Mary: 'I have thought a great deal of your certainty that your father intended Augustus to have that ten thousand dollars, Ailsa. On the whole I believe you are right, he could have meant nothing else, though why he should have said that to you, a tiny child, or why he should imagine his wishes were likely ever to be carried out through such a message, I do not see. The only theory is that he was already too weak to realize to whom he

was speaking, or how young you were, but that he happened to express to you what was in possession of his mind—and you were his favorite child. The main thing to be convinced of is that this desire actually was in his mind; was not a chance word, nor the imagining of a child. As you at once repeated what he said, at the time, the latter theory is disposed of.

"I want you to understand fully, Ailsa, that it would be impossible to establish any claim on such a ground, but I hope that I am an honest woman. At first I felt that your desire to hand over this sum to your half-brother was ridiculous; now I see it differently. Therefore, because I have decided that it probably was your father's intention to make Augustus this gift I am inclosing to you a check for ten thousand dollars, payable to your half-brother. Tell him that he has no choice but to accept it; I will not receive it back, and, if he does not use it, I shall simply deposit it in his name in a bank where, though it will not draw much interest, still it will be increasing to his benefit. I think I could not do anything for you directly that would make you as happy on your sixteenth birthday as this check will. I know you felt that I was wrong, if not dishonest to retain the money, and that it distressed you. It did not seem to me my duty to pay it over; I am willing to acknowledge that I was wrong So a happy birthday to you, my daughter, and though I saw plainly when I was in Renwyck that you were not going to be congenial to me

in tastes, yet I want you to feel that your mother is one with you, at least in principles. I am sure your kind friends are to give you a happy day on your birthday, and I hope I may increase your happiness by this act. Once more, love to you from your mother, Helen Brett."

"There, Molly-Mary; there!" Ailsa held up before Mrs. Brett's astonished gaze the check which her mother had sent, then dropped it in her sister-in-law's lap.

"Oh, we don't want it, Ailie dear!" cried Mrs. Brett.

"No, I know it, but father gave it to you," cried Ailsa. "It was all wrong for you not to have it. You don't know how glad I am! You don't know how distressed I was! Oh, Molly-Mary, it's bad enough not to be really intimate with your own family, not to like the same things, but it's perfectly awful to see right and wrong differently! It—oh, I can't tell you how it felt to know you—Gus—had not received this money, because, of course, law isn't anything! Father gave it to him, even if it was only through me, when I was so little. I'm so happy about it I could fly right up in the sky, singing all the way, as they say English larks do."

Molly-Mary was silenced. Swiftly she thought and decided that the kindest, as well as the justest thing to do was to take the money. For Ailsa was right; undoubtedly it had been

his father's intention to give his eldest son this legacy.

She kissed Ailsa without speaking, but Ailsa understood. The relief this acceptance was to her leaped into her eyes like a ray of light. She knew that if Molly-Mary advised her husband to take the gift, and to regard it as a tardy righting of a wrong, it would be done.

All the young Bretts came trooping up at this moment.

"Unpacked the box, mumsy," said Dins. "It's the rest of the pink glaze, not a nick in it, any more than in what we had."

"Now we ought to be rich," added Tilly. "It's all together, and we had the rest of the luck that goes with that set—what was it?"

" 'It brings happiness in the home, in marriage, in prosperity.' Isn't that it, mumsy?" asked Nan.

"That is the tradition of the pink glaze china, yes," assented Mrs. Brett. "It does look as though the magic still were forceful, doesn't it? For we hardly could be a happier household, and now we are growing richer!"

"I think we grew rich last fall, when Ailsa came," said Nan. "It didn't seem as though we could be richer, but a sister my own age was a regular gold mine added to me."

"That's so," agreed Tilly heartily. "Ailsa's a regular anaconda."

"The pill is trying to say Golconda!" cried Dins rapturously, the clue to Tilly's meaning being Nan's simile of the gold mine.

"Never mind, Tilly-Billy: they might easily have named that mine the Anaconda!" Tilly's mother comforted her.

Gussie was moved to hug Ailsa. "I hope you'll never spend a birthday anywhere but just here," she said.

"I dont believe I want to," said Ailsa. "I did need you all so dreadfully!"

"Well, we sure needed you!" said Dins.

"Not the maiden aunt! I seem to remember hearing that of all things we least needed a maiden aunt in the house!" cried Mr. Brett, coming into the room unheard.

"Daddy Brett, we didn't need a maiden aunt, not a real, *made* maiden aunt, but we needed a little aunt terribly, really *terribly*" cried Nan.

"And nobody could be less of an aunt than I am!" cried Ailsa. "It's just the nicest, best, happiest thing in the world to drop into the middle of a loving home and me part of it! I had no idea how lovely it was. I wouldn't care whether I was a grandfather, an aunt, or an armchair, as long as I got set down right in the heart of—of such heartiness as I've learned about! Molly-Mary knows what I mean!"

"Oh, yes, Molly-Mary knows," smiled Mrs. Brett, rising and patting Ailsa's shoulder.

"Molly-Mary has always felt precisely as you do, Ailie. It's a curious and a blessed truth about a womanly woman that big things cannot fill her, but little things fill her to overflowing—if a home and a chance to live for her

husband and children are little things; some people seem to think they are!"

"And a chance to make a little aunt happy, and to make a little girl grow up into a big woman—like her sister-in-law?" hinted Ailsa.

"That, too, Ailie," said Mrs. Brett. "Though the children didn't find fault with their little aunt, just as she was when she came."

"I've made a sort of proverb-sounding thing on you, Ailsa. I meant to have had it ready to spring on you out in the woods, but I got stuck on it. Now's it's done. Listen to it." Dins struck an attitude and declaimed:

"A little aunt rejoiceth the Bretts, and a twelvemonth more of her is a boon and a blessing. And if anyone asketh: What ails her? In chorus shall the Bretts reply: The little aunt, Ailsa! And she is all right!"

"Oh, Dins! Oh, *Dins*," cried Nan. "Isn't that dreadful?"

But they all laughed, for people who are happy laugh at little. And down in the bottom of her heart "the little aunt" liked Din's absurdity, because she felt perfectly sure that this beloved family meant every word of this, and more.

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